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# BLOOD OF THE EMPEROR

AN ANTHOLOGY

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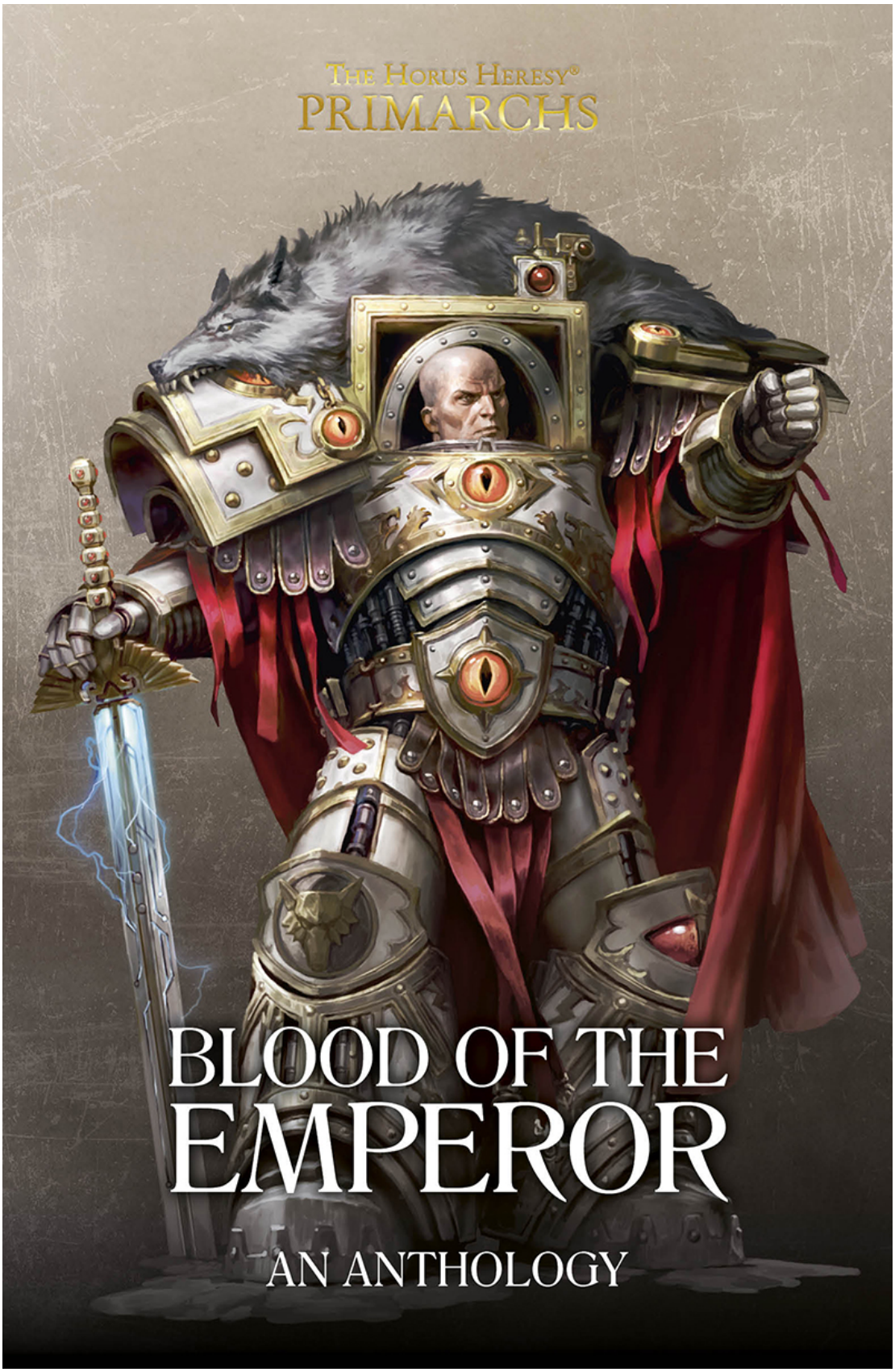

# BLOOD OF THE EMPEROR

AN ANTHOLOGY

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# BLOOD OF THE EMPEROR

AN ANTHOLOGY

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# LUPUS DAEMONIS

Graham McNeill

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Nergüi’s first memory of murder was that of his adoptive father.

His young ears pressed to his father’s chest, he remembered the frantic heartbeat as the man carried him from the massacre behind them.

At the time, Nergüi didn’t know who was doing the killing.

Down in the utterdark it almost didn’t matter.

Murder was mundane, killing the norm.

Kill or be killed. Kill them before they kill you.

It didn’t matter who *they* were. *They* was anyone beyond the light cast by the stuttering gas-lumens.

*They* was anyone you didn’t know.

*They* was everyone who didn’t bear the cut-mark of your clan, your gang, your family.

Even that wasn’t always enough to keep you safe.

Down in the utterdark, life was teeming and cheap. Brothers murdered brothers, parents abandoned children and wives killed husbands.

Back then, Nergüi was too young to know how the world worked in the lightless warrens and filth-choked tunnels infesting the planet’s bedrock like maggots in mouldy bread. All he knew was the beating of the man’s heart, a man who had become his adoptive father only moments ago.

A man who looked as surprised by that turn of events as anyone.

Nergüi remembered shouts, guttural and hot, like the volcanic heat of the deep mines.

No real sense of their meaning, but he understood the fear behind them.

Fear that had brought the Marrow Tearers with serrated knives to the clan cavern.

And even barely out of swaddling clothes, he understood that hate was fear’s twin.

His father stumbled and fell, vomiting a froth of blood and black bile.

Splintered bullet fragments had pierced his lungs. Both were rapidly filling with fluid. He set the child in his arms down and drew a rusted punch dagger. Shadows moved on the soot-stained walls. Gutting knives flashed, fresh-sharpened edges gleaming in the firelight.

Bellowing with rage, his father surged upright and fought.

Because fighting and killing was what you did down in the utterdark.

You fought until your gun ran dry, until your knife dulled and snapped, until your fists were broken.

You only lay down when your heart stopped beating or your skull was bashed open with a rock.

You fought until they cut your throat and laid the mirror coins on your eyes.

He remembered the grunts of grappling bodies, the deafening boom of primitive firearms.

Bright flashes and the taste of bad powder. Fear-stink of butchered meat.

The electric tang of blood in the air.

Father fought hard, but in the end he died.

A ricochet blew out his knee, and a motorised, tooth-bladed axe hammered his side. It tore up through his blood-filled lungs. Nergüi’s father fell beside him, blood pouring from his ruined body.

He died staring into the boy’s shining sea-green eyes with incomprehension.

That was Nergüi’s first memory of murder, but it wouldn’t be his last.

Cthonia was a world *built* on murder.

A mesh of iron scaffolding, like cobwebs left by a giant metal spider, clung to the painted walls of the Deeprats' cavern, and looping runs of chain were strung between them like sinews stretched on a drying rack. Lingering fumes from pipe bomb explosions and gunfire hung in acrid screeds.

The rocky floor was slippery with sweat, shit and the wet remains of disembowelments.

Whooping yells from the fresh-blooded Reiver braves filled the air. His fellow clansmen dragged the limp corpses of the Deeprat Clan to the volcanic fissure at the heart of the infernal cavern.

No one knew how deep it was, only that, way, way down, its walls were said to be crusted with precious metals, gems and seams of chem-rich sediment. When Cthonia's orbit swung it away from the blue sun and her molten heart cooled, it was said a clan could mine a fortune from the depths. Nergüi didn't know if that was true, but rumour of it had been enough for the Reivers to slaughter the Deeprats and claim their territories.

He watched with a mix of envy and pride as the young men – boys no longer – carved their names into the chests of the enemies they had slain.

Kill-names; earned in murder.

The newly elevated warriors smeared dead men's blood across their eyes and mouths. They howled like beasts, savage and feral, drunk on slaughter and war-lust.

The corpses, having served their purpose, were dumped into the magma fissure without ceremony. The braves backed away from its brutal heat as Khageddon hauled the mutilated Deeprat chieftain by his topknot to the centre of the cavern.

The beaten man struggled in their Overlord's grip, wounded and near death, but still alive.

On Cthonia that was never a good thing.

In the utterdark, you were taught to fight so hard they *had* to kill you.

The tribes and clans of Cthonia were not kind to captives, inflicting tortures so hideous they reduced even the strongest-willed to soiled, gibbering lunatics.

Khageddon's hulking metal-and-flesh body was slathered in blood, his own and that of the dozen men he'd killed. His own topknot had come loose

in the fighting, and long black hair hung like a dark veil over his face. All Nergüi could see of the Overlord's scarred features was the gleaming silver of his implanted fangs and the pale orb of his machine-eye.

'Reivers!' yelled Khageddon. 'Blood has answered for blood!'

The braves slowly circled him, bent over and beating their callused palms and blades on the rocky floor of the cavern. A low growl built in their throats, guttural and subvocal, wordless but rich with dark meaning. It was the hunt song, a slow rhythm of metal and meat on stone.

Nergüi felt it touch something deep inside his patchwork body, stirring an aching sense of loss; a memory long forgotten. Or a future he didn't yet understand.

He yearned to join his clansmen, to howl in the pack circle.

But he wasn't yet battle-blooded, and anyone without a kill-name joining a pack circle would be set upon by the braves. Cut to pieces without even the dignity of mirror coins for their eyes.

Khageddon lifted his ritual knife, a long blade left by one of the takers of the dead.

Its edge never dulled, and no matter how much blood it spilled, the red-rust never touched it.

'Aebathan!' yelled the Overlord, and drew the blade across the Deeprat's throat.

He sawed back through meat and muscle, sinew and bone until the head was cut loose and the body toppled into the fissure.

Khageddon lifted the head and let the red rain from the stump drizzle down over his face before tossing it after the body.

In the ruddy light of the magma fissure, he was monstrous.

Life was cheap on Cthonia. Nergüi had known that all his life.

A man's whole existence meant less than the blade he carried, the handful of bullets in his pouch, or the fit of his steel-jacketed boots. Nergüi's life meant less than most.

He'd been told that as long as he could remember.

He was the runt of the clan, a freak of scars. A survivor of wounds no child could possibly survive.

A boy whose body refused to grow and develop like the others.

Some called him a curse, a changeling left by the evil spirits at Cthonia's

heart to torment them.

They all wished him dead, but the Overlord had forbidden it.

Khageddon had found him hung from a hook in an abattoir cave of the Corpse Grinders, a skin-masked butcher in a blood-stiffened apron readying him for a greased spit. Khageddon had gutted the man before lifting the boy from the hook and carrying him back to Reiver territory.

No one knew why and he had never given a reason for saving the infant with shining sea-green eyes.

Down in the dark, everyone's eyes were a dull and sickly blue. Terms like biodiversity were unknown to the Reivers, but everyone knew that different meant *bad*.

Different meant you were an outcast. *Shunned*.

Many were the days Nergüi wished the Overlord had left him to die on that hook.

Khageddon had called him that, a meaningless name from the dead language of Cthonia's first deep miners. One that literally meant *no name*.

'It is for protection,' said Khageddon on one of the rare days he bothered to speak to Nergüi.

'Protection from what?'

Khageddon looked to the roof of the cave, and his pearlescent eye clicked and scratched as the mechanism seized. A shadow of regret passed over his face.

'From the future,' he said.

Anger touched Nergüi and made him reckless. 'I don't need protection,' he spat.

Khageddon backhanded him with a savage blow that knocked him down and loosened his teeth.

'I did not say it was for *your* protection.'

No more was said on the matter.

The Deeprats had been an old clan, one that liked to hold onto the past, to *remember*.

They hoarded useless things in recesses cut into the painted walls of their caves: old books, scraps of paper, and identical crystals that were good for nothing but hand-catapult ammunition. The pages of the books were gummed together with greenish damp, and the papers were simply long lists

of numbers that kept decreasing.

He lifted one of the crystals, an angular blue cube with swirling gold veins threading its interior, and lifted it to his eye. The surface was cloudy and scratched, but Nergüi saw a web of impossibly complex patterns in its depths that looked too regular to be natural.

Nergüi shrugged and placed the crystal in the pouch of his tunic.

The other clans mocked the Deeprats for their hunger to know the past, but Nergüi would have given anything to know more about where he had come from. He had no memory of his mother, nor any knowledge of a father save the nameless man who'd tried to save him as an infant.

Khageddon was the closest thing to a father he had, and the Overlord's hate for him was palpable.

The Reivers hated him too, but if he read the look in their eyes when they thought he wasn't looking, they feared him as well, though he couldn't think of a single reason why they should.

Nergüi circled the cave, running his hand along the wall and tracing the telling of a story painted onto the rock beneath his palm. The mural was faded and the artwork crude, though how he knew to judge it so he wasn't sure. It depicted the harsh blue sun of Cthonia burning above a desolate landscape of soaring machine towers that split the planet's bedrock and greedily drank its bounty.

The farther along the wall he went, the closer the towers grew, until the horizon was filled with their insatiable hunger. Each tower had a groove chiselled into the rock beneath it, and Nergüi traced their looping lines. These represented the mine workings, an endless network of tunnels that had cut deep into the planet and hollowed it out like scavengers picking a carcass clean.

Between the towers were blocky figures, men who travelled the stars in cities of stone and steel.

The old-timers spoke of seeing starships in their youth, titanic monsters of blue fire and fury.

Nergüi longed to see one, to one day behold a field of stars instead of the dripping oil and soot-stained ceilings of rock that were all you saw when you looked up in the utterdark.

But these days, nobody went to the surface.

Why would they? The sun burned your skin, the air tasted bad and the

blue-eyed ghouls haunting the ruins preyed on the living for sport. Anyone who went to the surface never came back.

But the thought of something existing beyond the squalid darkness below the surface was like an itch Nergüi just couldn't scratch, a thought that wouldn't go away no matter how much he chased it.

'This can't be all there is,' he whispered.

His finger followed a groove back to the planet's surface and kept going, past the soaring towers, up into the darkness of space and beyond. He circled Cthonia's star and spiralled outwards onto bare rock.

The Deeprats hadn't painted anything beyond the blue orb, their imagination unable to conceive of what wonders might exist outside of what they could see or what they remembered of the old tales.

Nergüi closed his eyes, picturing skies of blue and green, alien shores of crystal silver, ancient structures of polished granite gleaming beneath a golden sun. He inhaled, tasting the salt spuming on ocean waves breaking against cliffs of basalt, and smelling the loam of rich earth in which living things might grow. The hairs on his arms rippled with the sensation of warm winds over endless plains of high grass, where the air was so crisp and clear it tasted of cut glass.

'One day I will see such sights,' he said. 'One day I will see the skies of these far-off worlds.'

The sensations were so acute, the liminal space between memory and imagination became meaningless. In his mind's eye he saw a soaring range of snow-capped mountains at the roof of the world, where a single tower pierced the clouds.

A light burned in its tallest window like a beacon, calling to him…

'I *know* you,' he said, the breath quickening in his throat.

'Talking to yourself again, freak?' said a voice behind him.

Memory, imagination and reality crashed together once more, and Nergüi turned to see four of the freshly blooded braves behind him. Karaamat and his friends, Oromegon, Nyla and Barsine.

He hadn't heard them enter, and he was normally so careful in being aware of his surroundings.

Karaamat circled the cavern, glancing disdainfully at the mural and the scraps of the old world the Deeprats had preserved. The boy was around twelve or thirteen years old, powerfully built, and with a half-moon scar

over his right eye. Oromegon was his brute twin, and like his brother, wore his long hair in a leather-wrapped topknot.

Nyla and Barsine kept their hair long at the top and back, but shaved at the sides, with long scalp locks woven with hooks and nails. Nergüi had always thought the girls beautiful, in the same way that a well-forged knife could be beautiful.

‘What are you doing here, *no-name*?’ demanded Karaamat.

‘Nothing,’ said Nergüi. ‘Just looking around.’

‘You shouldn’t be here, this is *my* cave now.’

‘It is?’

‘Yeah, didn’t you see? We got blooded today.’

Karaamat proudly slapped a hand on the clan markings freshly cut into the hardness of his pectorals. Ash had been smeared into the wounds to scarify them and permanently mark him as a proud killer of the Reiver Clan.

Nergüi nodded. ‘I saw, yeah. Killed three men, they say.’

Karaamat rounded on him, anger twisting his face into something bestial. His hook-bladed knife appeared in his hand, the blade still dull with the rust-brown stains of murder.

‘What do you mean, *they say*? You doubt me, no-name? You think I didn’t kill ’em? I’ll gut you for sayin’ so!’

Nergüi took a step away from Karaamat, pressing himself against the wall.

‘No, Karaamat, no way. I just mean that’s what I was told. You know, because I didn’t go on the raid. Khageddon wouldn’t let me.’

‘That’s right,’ spat Karaamat. ‘You ain’t blooded. Never gonna earn a kill-name, neither.’

‘Because none of the older braves will train me.’

‘Yeah, you ain’t strong enough to be trained,’ said Oromegon, flexing the powerful muscles in his chest and arms. ‘Looks like your body got all broke up, and they didn’t put you back together so good.’

‘He’s the runt of the pack,’ said Nyla, picking up a mildewed book and flicking idly through its pages without comprehension. Rotted scraps of paper fell from within as the pages disintegrated, and Nergüi felt an unexpected stab of anguish to see the knowledge the book contained so casually lost.

‘Please, don’t do that,’ he said, and instantly regretted it as her lip curled in a sneer.

To show you cared for something was to show weakness.

If you cared for something, an enemy could hurt you with it.

Nyla threw the book at his feet and said, ‘It’s junk, no-name. Ain’t good for nothin’ but burning.’

Nergüi bent to retrieve it, and met Karaamat’s knee as he cannoned it up into his face.

His head snapped back, cracking painfully on the wall.

Blood sprayed the mural from his broken nose. Blinded by pain, he fell back onto his haunches, hands flying to his face. He curled into a ball as they fell upon him, driving their boots and fists into his chest and stomach. He kept the muscles tense and his breathing shallow as he waited for it to end.

Pain was nothing new to him, nothing new to anyone on Cthonia, so he gritted his teeth and took it.

This wasn’t his first beating, and it likely wouldn’t be his last.

‘*Scream*, no-name!’ yelled Karaamat, hauling him upright and brandishing his blade. ‘Why don’t you ever scream?’

‘Maybe we ain’t hurting him enough,’ suggested Oromegon.

‘Yeah, cut one of them scars open!’ added Nyla.

Oromegon wrenched his arms painfully to the side as Nyla ripped open his tunic. He let her do it.

Fighting would only make things worse, give them an excuse to kill him.

His chest and belly exposed, his pale skin was ridged with scars. These were wounds that would have killed any tribal warrior thrice over, but even a youngblood of Cthonia could see these weren’t the wavering lines of shivs or picks, nor the scars of bullet tracks.

These were scars cut with care and precision, a weaving pattern that spoke of artifice and science beyond anything to be found in the utterdark, even among the insane tech-seers who dwelled down in the magma caverns.

‘You got put together, no-name,’ hissed Nyla. ‘That’s why you got no mama.’

Oromegon laughed. ‘Someone stitched you together from all the runty bits left over after the Corpse Grinders were done with some downdark tribe, I reckon.’

‘Then threw you out because you was so useless,’ finished Karaamat.

Nergüi had heard all the insults before, had seen the looks of disgust

whenever people saw his scarred flesh, pale and veined like a corpse drained by the feral blood-feasters.

He locked his eyes onto Karaamat and something passed between them, some invisible connection.

A glint of defiance, perhaps. Or, worse, indifference to this beating.

It touched some hitherto untapped well of rage within Karaamat. His eyes widened, and he pistoned his fist into Nergüi's face. The blow cracked his cheek and slammed the back of his head against the floor of the cave. Another blow split his lip and splintered teeth flew from Nergüi's mouth.

Again and again Karaamat's fist slammed into his face.

The others backed away, suddenly fearful of his rage. To Nergüi, it seemed as though some potent force was working through the young brave, driving his fists with lethal intent.

'Kara!' said Nyla. 'That's enough! You're gonna kill him!'

Karaamat ignored her, raining down blows with one purpose only. Murder.

Nyla pulled his shoulders, but he was too strong. Too intent on this beating.

'Leave him be,' she yelled, drawing her bone-handled knife. 'Khageddon says he's marked. You don't kill no marked soul, do ya?'

She grabbed his topknot and pulled his head back, ready to cut his throat. Instead of resisting her, Karaamat roared and surged backwards. Her dagger spun away, clattering to the rock floor beside Nergüi. He rolled onto his side, coughing teeth and blinking away blood.

He saw Karaamat drive Nyla against the opposite wall.

Saw the girl's face contort with pain.

Her legs buckled and she slid down the wall, Karaamat's hooked blade buried to the hilt in her heart.

She was dead before she hit the ground.

'Nyla!' cried Barsine.

Karaamat pushed her back. Murder-lust was in his eyes. He'd already killed three people today, now a fourth. None of them wanted to be his fifth.

Karaamat let out a shuddering breath and stared at each of them.

'Shit, Kara, you killed Nyla…' said Oromegon.

'I never liked her anyway,' he said, bending to twist and pull his knife from the dead girl's chest. He wiped it clean on Oromegon's tunic before turning and pushing past him.

He turned as he reached the cave’s entrance, pointing the gleaming blade at Nergüi then at Nyla.

‘Get rid of her before I get back,’ he said.

Nergüi watched Nyla’s body tumble down the fissure until it was lost in the red glow of the magma far below. He felt nothing for her; he hadn’t liked her and she hadn’t liked him. So why had she risked a confrontation with Karaamat for him?

No answer presented itself, and he supposed he’d never know.

She was dead and no one would say any words for her. No one would miss her and she would be forgotten within a day. That was the Cthonian way. No ties, no cares, no loyalty.

It was no way to live.

Nergüi turned her knife over in his hand. Too valuable to get rid of – more care than was usual had gone into its making. Its handle had once been a thigh bone, and its grip was carved with thunderbolts originating from a selenite pommel in the shape of a crescent moon.

He could feel the eyes of the clan upon him, but death was so woven into the everyday fabric of the utterdark, that no one thought it strange for him to be dumping a body like this. So callous a disregard for the loss of one of their own sickened Nergüi. That was nothing new, of course; life on Cthonia was nothing to be celebrated or cherished.

Any one of the tribe would place more value on the knife he held than Nyla’s life.

The fundamental imbalance of that seethed like a coal in Nergüi’s heart.

Everything he had learned and everything he had been taught told him that life in the utterdark was nothing but a brutal struggle for survival. The strong killed the weak. Anything else was meaningless.

It was how things had always been and how they always would be.

Cthonia was dying, but its people would fight till their last breaths to kill each other.

*Where was the sense in that?*

He lifted his head, seeing layers of fumes above him, swirling as they were drawn up through cracks in the ceiling. High above, ancient tunnels, likely bored as ventilation for the deep mines, still pulled currents of air through them, freighted with the hard metallic flavours of the surface. Hints of steel

and the biting-on-tin taste of age-old technologies, the tang of archaic sciences.

He felt a shadow move behind him, recognised the scents and sounds of Khageddon.

‘Did you kill the girl?’ he asked.

‘Her name was Nyla.’

‘I have already forgotten her name. Did you kill her?’

‘No, Karaamat did.’

‘Why?’

‘Does it matter? Who needs a reason to kill down here?’

‘You’re right,’ agreed Khageddon. ‘It doesn’t matter.’

Nergüi turned to face the Reivers’ Overlord. ‘Then why ask?’

‘Because *you* think it matters. You seek to find sense and meaning where none exists, to graft higher purpose onto those who have none. The only purpose we have down here is to fight and kill, to take what we need from those weaker than us. Anything else is irrelevant.’

‘I don’t believe that,’ said Nergüi. ‘This world and everyone on it… we used to be part of something, part of something greater than… *this*. Fighting like rats in a cage, killing each other like it doesn’t matter who lives or who dies.’

‘It *doesn’t* matter,’ said Khageddon. ‘Nothing matters. Not you, not me. Nothing. The struggle is all there is. It is *all* that matters. We fight, we kill and we die. What more does there need to be?’

Nergüi looked back at the rock ceiling through the fumes, imagining his mind’s eye flying up through the thin clefts and fissures in the crust of the planet’s bedrock that led to the surface.

‘We were meant for something more than this,’ he said. ‘*I* was made for something more than this.’

‘Perhaps you were,’ said Khageddon, placing a hand on his shoulder.

For the briefest second, Nergüi thought the gesture almost paternal.

Then he felt the pressure of the Overlord’s grip.

And realised Khageddon was thinking of pushing him into the magma fissure.

He should have been afraid, should have fought to free himself, but Nergüi felt neither fear nor anger, only a weary acceptance of this fate.

*What use was survival when life was worth nothing?*

*Why struggle when only more pain and suffering was the reward?*

The grip on his shoulder tightened, and Nergüi felt a strange tension wracking Khageddon through his palm. It spoke of a struggle within his soul, a war between the desire to push Nergüi to his death, and something… something even he didn't understand.

A bass rumble of shifting rock groaned through the cave, like distant thunder over a far horizon.

Something flashed in the depths of the fissure, like discharge from a power-coupler.

Khageddon's grip loosened on his shoulder. He stepped away from the boy.

Without turning, Nergüi said, 'Why?'

'Cthonia spoke to me,' said Khageddon.

The only light beneath Cthonia was that of fire and crackling spots of fading lumens left over from the time when men had plumbed its depths for riches. Those days were long gone. The planet's wealth had been stripped away, its deep mines played out, and only scraps remained in the darkest, most lethal cracks of the world.

The empty tunnels and clefts remaining in the rock were bleak and dusty, hung with swaying chains and crusted with ancient machinery too large to scavenge. The walls were knapped like flint where the drills and picks of long-dead pioneers had hacked the rock until Cthonia had nothing left to give.

The planet's once limitless wealth was exhausted.

Now only one resource remained in abundance…

*But to what purpose could such human wretchedness be set?*

Nergüi kept close to the lights, but not too close.

Light meant people, and he was far enough from Reiver territory that those people would all be enemies. Cthonia's inhabitants were forever on the move, so he couldn't be sure to which tribe the lights belonged, and to walk into a rival tribe's camp without a blood-host would be as sure a death sentence as if he leapt blind into a depthless chasm.

Even death alone in the dark would be a kinder end than seeking succour from a tribe not his own.

He climbed ever upwards.

He ascended sheer cliffs of basalt, sprinted across swaying chain bridges while the masked toll-keepers emptied their bowels, and climbed creaking ladders of flaking iron beaten into the rock to pass through hatches long since rusted open.

Every step carried him farther into the unknown reaches of the world.

But still he instinctively knew the way.

Up. Always up.

Children of Cthonia learned to navigate the labyrinthine tunnels as infants.

As infants, they were abandoned in the darkness and left to fend for themselves. A child either found their way back to the clan or they died a slow, agonising death from dehydration, starvation and madness.

By necessity, Nergüi had learned to be fast and to find the hidden paths through Cthonia's bedrock.

Hard-won knowledge that now allowed him to safely cross the territories of the Helleboreae and the pack predator Catulans. He was almost clear of Rukal territory, but with their recent slaughter of the Arosokal and their rumoured stockpile of supplies, he hoped their legendary bloodlust would be sated for now.

He heard war drums echoing up through fuming splits in a toothed cavern of dripping stalactites.

Angled beams of pale moonlight speared in from cracks in the roof, and crackling rad winds moaned through the stalagmites growing upwards from pools of chalky water.

Hundreds of corpses were impaled on these stalagmites, their ribs peeled back with spears of rock rising up through their chests and their broken limbs hanging limp.

The moisture dripping from above ran down the slack faces of the dead like milky tears, slowly encasing them in a skein of pearlescent minerals and preserving them in the moment of their greatest agony.

This was a trophy cavern of the Justaerin, and typical of their cruelty.

Nergüi paused beside the impaled body of a man whose body was covered in swirling scars and hooded eye tattoos that marked him as one of the Esharkol, a clan that dwelled just below the surface and plundered the ancient ruins. His tattoos curled around cancerous lesions caused by repeated exposure to hard radiation.

The liquid flowing from his bent body was streaked with crimson threads.

A fresh kill, only recently impaled upon the rock.

His eyes flicked open.

‘Boy…’ he gasped, his eyes pleading.

Nergüi backed away from the man. Dying men were apt to drag you down with them.

‘Boy,’ repeated the man, holding out his hand. ‘Your… knife. Give… me.’

‘No,’ said Nergüi.

‘Do it!’ hissed the man. ‘Can’t die… without… weapon in… hand.’

The Esharkol had only moments left to him. Nergüi should move on, leave before the dying man’s cries attracted the attention of the Justaerin.

Nergüi nodded slowly and took out Nyla’s dagger.

‘Yes,’ said the man, blood bubbling from his lips. ‘Give… it…’

Nergüi placed the edge of the knife against the man’s throat and sliced it open.

The man’s eyes widened in shock and anger. His hand clawed the air, and the last spasms of his heart pumped a weak stream of blood over Nergüi’s hand as he pulled the blade clear.

The Esharkol bled out. His limbs convulsed as the light faded from his eyes.

Nergüi lifted his arm. The dagger and his hand were wet with bright blood.

The blade caught the reflected light of the moon, turning it red.

This didn’t make him blooded.

He hadn’t killed this man in battle, but it was a start.

He found a route to the surface just beyond the Justaerin trophy cave, following a crooked stair that spiralled around a straight-cut shaft filled with iron debris and smashed scaffolding. Nergüi felt his skin prickling as he climbed higher, the temperature rising with every step upwards.

The air tasted of metal and dust, of things best forgotten and abandoned.

Nergüi came to a ladder that climbed a rough-hewn shaft towards a steel plate, crudely welded over a buckled frame. Blue light from the surface seeped in around its broken edges.

He climbed the ladder, peering up through the gap in the plate. Bracing his shoulders against it, he pushed up. He felt it give, but not enough. Too heavy to move completely, but enough of a gap remained for him to squeeze through.

Nergüi stared at the gap. Particulate matter floated in the angled shaft of blue light.

Behind him was darkness and misery, a life of resentment and endless war.

Ahead lay… *what*?

He didn't know. What was he expecting, that a new life would open up before him, that everything he thought he knew of the surface was wrong and that he'd find a purpose beyond the utterdark?

No, he wasn't so foolish as to believe in miracles.

At best, this trip to the surface was a diversion, a temporary escape. A memory to cling to in the days, months and years to come in the unending war of the grim darkness below.

Nergüi smiled. That was *more* than enough.

He pushed up through the steel plate, and hauled himself onto the surface of Cthonia.

The ladder emerged into a wide hangar of hard permacrete floors and steel sheeting.

Broken walls of prefabricated blocks surrounded him on three sides, vitrified to a glasslike finish by some terrible heat. Dust blew in from the open side, lying in undulant drifts and twisting in wind-blown spirals.

Abandoned ore transporters sat in forlorn ranks, their hoppers empty and their wheels, the smallest of which were taller than a full-grown man, rotted and flat. The high roof of the hangar was all but gone, and the cold blue orb of Cthonia's star glared down at him from the oil-dark sky. Nergüi shielded his eyes from its piercing light, feeling the heavy radiation already beginning to darken his pallid complexion.

Through the missing wall, Nergüi saw a wasteland like nothing he had ever seen.

Smashed and toppled structures of dark stone and steel surrounded him, remnants of a previous civilisation long gone to dust. Towering mining engines on tracked wheels lay broken open on their sides with ash piled in their windward sides. Looming over this vista of ruin were sagging towers with enormous rotary cable drums at their summits, buckled and leaning as if from ferocious impacts.

Nergüi felt an aching sadness at the sight of what remained of his world.

Emerging from the hangar, the vista of devastation only widened.

Yet this was not the devastation of war, but the wreckage of a place abandoned, like a bond-wife cast aside when bad water and the gradual build-up of toxins eventually turned her womb into a creator of hideous monsters.

The western horizon shimmered with veils of blue, green and gold light that rippled as though the sky were on fire. It made the atmosphere bitter in his lungs: hard, granular and caustic.

He could feel its oily residue coating the inside of his throat with every breath.

The initial pain he'd felt at the surface's brightness slowly faded as Nergüi walked slowly down the sloped esplanade before the vehicle hangar. Parallel rails, half-buried in grey dust, split and diverged before him. Too large for mining carts, these were wider than two men lying head to toe.

Nergüi tried and failed to imagine the scale of the machine that could travel on such rails.

He moved through the ruins, trying to reconcile what he had been told of the surface with the sights before him now. Nothing within its environs was suited to his human scale, and Nergüi felt as though he had travelled to some distant world where creatures not bound by mortal laws had once ruled.

Everything on the surface – every structure and vehicle, every titanic machine and dormant apparatus – was built for men scaled to the size of gods.

Nergüi paused in his explorations as he heard something beyond the howl of the wind through the ruins. The sound was clearly artificial, rhythmic and persistent, like a machine heart beating on the air itself. Moving deeper into the ruins he saw the stark glow of actinic light.

Light meant people, and you didn't walk into a rival tribe's camp without a blood-host.

But what kind of blood-host could hope to face gods?

None, but perhaps a single individual might pass unnoticed…

He kept to the shadows, calling upon everything he had learned in the depths of Cthonia's darkness.

Eventually, he halted in the shadow of a shattered structure lined with the scavenged shells of hollowed-out machines. He took position behind a ruined section of wall, peering through the corroded pipes of a giant

turbine.

Below him was a shallow crater in which sat a squat starship shaped like a flattened cylinder with tall, rectangular drive nacelles at its rear. It stood on splayed legs, and a host of figures worked to remove something from a pit dug into the dusty ground before it. Powerful stab-lights on tripods lit the excavations, but Nergüi couldn't tell what it was they were removing.

Most of the figures were grey-skinned men with metal arms or legs grafted to their bodies, running the gamut from individuals with single augmetic limbs to those that were more like earth-moving engines with human scraps alloyed to their machine hearts.

Towering bipedal walkers stalked the perimeter on oddly jointed legs, plated in curved steel and bearing enormous cannons fitted with colossal ammo hoppers. They bore riders with visors moulded into the form of androgyne gods, equipped with pulsing red eyes that scanned the ruins.

Nergüi knew that to attract their notice would be to die.

Overseers in crimson robes stitched with golden cogs directed the work parties, and Nergüi had never seen their like before: chimerics of machine and man that communicated in grating barks, like hand-cranked alarm sirens that warned a tribe of intruders. Flitting, obsidian skulls darted overhead, screeching at one another in whistling pops and clicks.

'What are you?' he whispered.

He turned his attention to the object they were excavating. He still couldn't see exactly what it was, something around three metres long and cylindrical, tapered at one end. Dust from the excavators obscured the object, as did the robed overseers, but a glimpse of carved thunderbolts on its golden skin triggered a sudden jolt of recall he could not understand.

Nergüi started to rise from his cover behind the dead turbine, but caught himself just in time.

Pebbles skittered down the slope, and he ducked back as one of the bipedal strider machines paused in its circuit of the perimeter. Its long-barrelled cannon swung around and targeting beams pulsed into his hiding place.

He kept utterly still, hardly daring to breathe.

The beams widened and narrowed their focus as they swept through the space, rotating and filling it with light. Nergüi had no real idea what the light was doing, but the instinct of the hunted kept him immobile.

At last the beams ceased their probing and Nergüi released his breath.

He risked a glance through the pipework down into the crater and was relieved to see the giant machine continue in its marching stride.

In the time he had kept still, the robed overseers had removed the golden object from the ground and were even now escorting it aboard their ship. It was gone before he could see it again properly, but the reverence with which these people were treating it suggested it was a relic or object of great import.

Nergüi heard the crunch of stone the instant before the whining build-up of energy.

He spun on his heel in time to see a hooded figure in red robes with a long-rifle at its shoulder.

Its eyes were twin spots of pale blue light, and the heavy grained wood of its rifle was in stark contrast to the intricate machinery of the weapon's firing mechanism.

Fear clamped hard on Nergüi's heart and the breath caught in his throat.

He dived to the side as the air between them buckled with a discharge of energy.

The brick wall behind Nergüi exploded into dust and fragments. Red-hot pieces of pipework spun away like blades. Nergüi rolled and ran for cover as the rifleman fired again. The same blue of his eyes beamed from an underslung gemlight.

Nergüi slid into cover behind a detached fan, each of its blades as wide as he was tall.

The robed figure pumped shot after shot in Nergüi's wake, blasting bronzed chunks of fire-edged metal from the ancient fan. Portions of it fell away, clattering to the permacrete in a deafening rain of debris. Nergüi scooped up a handful of the dust, bolts and washers scattering on the floor.

Braying squawks of alarm sounded from the crater below.

Nergüi heard the swift *snap-click* of a magazine change, instantly followed by the building whine of the weapon's firing mechanism.

He spun around the fan blade, Nyla's bone-handled dagger held low in his right hand.

The shooter swung his rifle to bear and pulled the trigger.

The beam grazed Nergüi's shoulder, burning a fiery line across his flesh.

He roared and hurled himself at the figure. The impact was like running into a support pillar, but the two of them fell to the ground in a thrashing,

jabbing tangle of limbs.

The figure swung the butt of its rifle. It cracked painfully against Nergüi's skull. He rolled with the blow and spat blood into his enemy's glowing blue eyes. The light flickered and Nergüi used its momentary distraction to drive Nyla's dagger up into the thing's armpit.

It slid across overlapping bands of armour, but pierced the weaker flexseal.

He felt the tip dig into meat and sinew and pushed with all his strength.

A horrible machine scream issued from beneath the thing's hood. Nergüi drove the blade in deeper, seeking vital organs as he churned the dagger's grip like he was working a crank.

Something ruptured deep inside the figure, and a stinking wash of black blood gushed over Nergüi.

His foe shuddered and stopped moving, as if his life had simply switched off.

Nergüi rolled from the suddenly still body and dragged the blade from his enemy's chest cavity.

The sound of his own breath bellowed in lungs that suddenly felt too full of air. His heart was pounding with a nightmarish double beat that sounded impossibly loud.

He scrambled to his feet, hearing the heavy thump of the striding machines' iron footfalls.

He scooped up the fallen warrior's rifle and ran, the stock and trigger still sticky with oily blood.

More of the strobing blue targeting beams painted the air, and this time he was powerless to avoid them. He heard the chiming of a brass bell and howling brays of triumph. Crackling bursts of the strange language of static chased him.

*A warning? A command?*

Nergüi knew he could not escape. Too much open ground lay between him and safety.

Resolved to his death, he stopped and turned to look back at his pursuers.

If he couldn't escape, he would fight.

'Because fighting and killing is what you do down in the utterdark,' said Nergüi.

Two of the striding machines had him cold, their terrible weapons aimed right at him. One of the robed figures stood between the two machines. A

host of serpentine cable-arms drifted at its back.

Nergüi lifted the stolen rifle to his wounded shoulder, where the scorched flesh was already healing. His blood thickened and the heat beneath his skin signalled that its preternatural ability to repair itself was already underway.

Another strange scar to add to his collection.

‘You fight so hard they *have* to kill you.’

He pulled the trigger and a searing green bolt spat from the weapon.

A discharge of ghost-light enveloped the robed figure, and the bolt dissipated before it reached him.

Nergüi squeezed the trigger again and again, each shot dead on target, each impact absorbed by the invisible energy field. He fired until the weapon coughed empty.

‘You fight until your gun runs dry,’ said Nergüi, slinging the enemy warrior’s rifle over his shoulder and pulling out Nyla’s dagger.

‘You fight until your knife dulls and snaps, until your fists are broken.’

The ammo hoppers on the back of the striders clattered as scores of shells were fed into the giant weapons. The blue targeting beams swept over him again, penetrating his flesh so that they might know his every weakness. All the better to kill him.

‘You only lay down when your heart stops beating,’ said Nergüi.

With his free hand, he pulled out the two mirror coins on the cord hung around his neck.

Khageddon had given them to him, said they’d come from the eyes of his adoptive father.

Nergüi lifted the looped cord over his head, holding them out for his killers to see.

‘After you kill me, place these upon my eyes,’ he said.

The twisting coins caught the light of the blue sun, the metal smooth and polished.

The robed figure crackled a command, and the tall striders lowered their weapons.

To Nergüi’s amazement, they slowly turned and walked away.

The figure beckoned to him.

Nergüi shook his head. The figure beckoned again.

Nergüi turned and ran.

And this time he didn’t look back.

Khageddon turned the rifle over in his hands, admiring the workmanship of the trigger mechanism, the toothed cog symbol on its cheek plate, and the perfectly machined balance of the weapon.

'You killed the one who bore this?'

'I did,' replied Nergüi proudly.

He stood before his tribe, a man at last, holding himself tall for what felt like the first time in his life.

The light from the magma fissure illuminated Khageddon's face and the faces of the tribal braves surrounding them. Karaamat, Oromegon and Barsine watched, incredulous, as Khageddon lifted the rifle to his shoulder and sighted along the barrel with a grunt. Oil-burning lamps hung from the cavern ceiling, rocking back and forth in response to some distant movement in the rock.

'You killed one of the blue-eyed ghouls on the *surface*?'

'Yes.'

'How? How did you kill him?' said Khageddon, running a finger through the black residue on the rifle's stock.

'I spied upon their excavations,' said Nergüi. 'But they heard me, and one of their sentries almost surprised me. But I charged him, knocked him down.'

Nergüi pulled out Nyla's dagger, its blade still coated with black liquid.

'We struggled and I got the blade in under his armour. Drove it in good and deep. Then he died.'

Khageddon licked his finger, running the black tip over his lips.

'This blood is not a man's blood,' said the Overlord, dropping the rifle at his feet as though it were a poisonous rock-eel. 'It is the vitae-fluid of a *machine*. All you have done is bring death down upon us.'

'I don't understand,' said Nergüi, feeling his earlier hope fading like the light in the impaled Esharkol's eyes as he'd cut his throat. The rocking motion of the lamps overhead increased, and a low rumbling set Nergüi's teeth on edge.

'You brought that weapon to me, thinking I would blood you, that you had earned a kill-name?'

'I *have*,' insisted Nergüi. 'I–'

Khageddon didn't let him finish. He backhanded Nergüi across the face.

The impact drove him down onto one knee.

Once, that would have been enough to cow him, to keep him down on the ground in shame.

But the shedding of blood, whether in mercy or survival, had changed Nergüi.

It had touched something deep inside him, interacting with some hitherto unknown element like a reagent and igniting a newfound fire in his soul.

The roof of the cave shook, and veils of dust drifted downwards. A lamp fell from its hook, crashing to the floor in an explosion of glass and fire.

Murmurs of unease passed through the cave as a rumbling tremor rose from the fissure.

Red light bloomed in the deeps.

Nergüi wiped blood from his lip with the back of his hand.

He gripped the handle of Nyla's blade tight and rose to his full height.

Once, Khageddon had seemed like the most powerful among them, a killer supreme. An invincible warrior who would lead the Reivers to greatness, who would one day break the chains of the wretched existence that bound them in the darkness of ignorance and bloodshed.

But Nergüi now saw him for what he truly was: just another petty and bloodthirsty tyrant unworthy of devotion.

Khageddon saw the threshold crossed within him and nodded slowly.

'It is time,' he said, looking up as the roof of the cavern shook once more. 'Do it, *no-name*. Do it, and earn your kill-name in my blood.'

Nergüi stepped in close and rammed Nyla's dagger up under Khageddon's breastbone. It cut through the wet-meat resistance of muscle and organs, scraping against his ribs as it clove the man's heart.

The ground shook as Nergüi twisted the blade.

A catastrophic amount of blood gushed from the wound.

More sprayed from Khageddon's mouth as a wide crack split the cavern roof like tectonic plates shifting. Something colossal punched through the crack with a deafening howl of metal tearing rock.

A conical drill head screamed as it forced its bulk into the cavern.

The thing was scored and burned from its passage through the planet's bedrock, its sides caked in ash and dust. But the toothed cog symbol on its emerging armoured flanks was unmistakable.

Khageddon had been right. He *had* brought death down upon them.

Warriors scattered as cascades of rubble and rock fell in a deadly rain of

splintered stone.

Khageddon sank to his knees, the life pouring out of him with every second.

They went down together, embracing like a loving father and dutiful son.

The Overlord's head fell forward onto Nergüi's shoulders.

'I… give you… a… name,' he said through teeth gritted in agony.

'My kill-name?' said Nergüi.

Khageddon nodded and whispered in Nergüi's ear. A word, a *name*.

No longer was he Nergüi, the *no-name*.

The word spoken, Khageddon's face relaxed, as though he had passed on some terrible burden.

He smiled and looked up at the cavern roof with a strange, wistful expression. And with his last breath he said, 'It took me a lifetime to learn how to die.'

Khageddon's arms fell limp, and he toppled backwards, sliding down the slope towards the fissure.

A moment's regret touched the boy as he watched the man who had shaped him more than almost any other disappear from sight, but the feeling vanished with the next beat of his heart.

He stood and looked upon the world with fresh eyes.

The cave was collapsing and his tribe were dying, but he felt curiously calm.

*He knew who he was now.*

That understanding blew life over a spark deep in the very heart of him.

A spark that had always been there, smouldering in the darkness and on the edge of extinction, but which now roared back to life with a vengeance.

Knowledge flooded him: visions of a hostile galaxy of a billion worlds and uncounted civilisations.

At its heart was the ancient birthrock of humanity, a war-weary world ruled by a golden lord who sat His lonely vigil atop a soaring tower set among snow-mantled peaks at the roof of the world.

The lord looked up from His contemplation and smiled.

+It is time.+

Three simple words, but they were the key to unlocking the sleeping power within him. It unfolded in waves of surging, raw emotions; consuming the *no-name* boy he had been and rewriting him.

Long-dormant genes awoke and began their miraculous work.

Synapses within his mind blazed as fresh connections were forged.

Bones and organs swelled with new purpose. His body surged, all flesh ripe with ambition, as a vast and unknowable anatomical shift took place within him. Veins and arteries burned phosphor-bright trails across his numinous flesh as his old self was shed like a serpent's skin too small to contain its apotheosis.

It was agonising, this rebirth, every cell of his body ripped apart and wrought anew. It ferociously remade him without a care for his suffering, tearing him down and rebuilding his form as it was always meant to be. The pain was beyond what any living soul could endure and his mind began to collapse under the onslaught.

He threw back his head and howled as fire blazed from his outstretched arms.

And then it was over.

He fell to his knees as the sound and fury of the cavern's destruction roared back to life around him.

Titanic boulders and pulverised slabs of splintered rock were crashing down in a murderous rain. Choking clouds of dust hid the carnage, but he heard the screams of the hurt and the dying. Rocks smacked his shoulder, drawing impossibly vivid blood and shattering the collarbone beneath.

Another slammed into his forehead. His vision swam red.

Blood streamed down his face. It didn't matter.

*He knew who he was now.*

He breathed in ash and fire, tasted the metallic flavour of his own life. Crackling bolts of gunfire echoed strangely amid the thunderous sound of the cavern's collapse.

*Galvanic weaponry*, he thought, unsurprised he knew the term.

More rocks and debris struck him and he fell onto his back.

A strange lethargy suffused him, as though his body – exhausted from the business of transformation – were shutting down.

He smiled as his vision greyed and the sounds of death and destruction grew remote.

None of it mattered now.

*He knew who he was.*

He heard iron-shod footsteps approaching and looked up to see a red-robed

figure standing above him with a long-barrelled rifle that hummed with unearthly power.

A pair of blue eyes burned cold beneath a scarlet hood.

‘I have the boy.’

His hand shot out to enfold the hooded figure’s neck.

An alarmed blurt of machine language crackled from the bronze-grilled augmitter at its throat.

With only a little pressure, he crushed the blue-eyed warrior’s spine.

‘My name is… *Horus*!’

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# SKJALDS

Nick Kyme

*OceanofPDF.com*

Baerelt smacks the ice from his fur-wrapped boots. It’s tough and takes three or four blows from the side of his axe before it yields.

‘We need to keep moving,’ Baerelt tells his kinsmen, cinching the cloak of pelts tighter around his shoulders. His lips are numb, his cheeks abraded.

Torvur is blowing into the cup of his hands then rubbing the palms together, trying to get some feeling back. ‘Just as soon as the ice in my veins turns back into blood.’

Ulfvye doesn’t comment. He watches the snow-choked darkness, listening to the wind for the howling of something other than the breath of the Fenrisian winter.

‘Or when we have flame to see by,’ Torvur complains, jutting his chin at Laggenuf.

Their scout is crouched in the lee of a rocky outcrop, chipping away with flint and steel, trying to coax the fire to life in his oil-swaddled torch. It flickers, barely, but the spark is snuffed by the wind.

‘Almost there…’ Laggenuf calls back, still chipping. The click and scrape of his flint is like a bell chime, lonely and desolate.

‘Hurry it up then,’ says Ulfvye, gruff and nervous. Frost clings to his bushy eyebrows, stiffening them like frozen fox tails.

‘You hear something, Ulfvye?’ asks Torvur, and goes to stand with the tall Vusslenk. The double-edged sword scrapes from its sheath as Torvur draws it. Baerelt smells the oil on its blade that keeps the weapon from sticking in the scabbard.

‘Something…’ Ulfvye replies. His eyes haven’t left the same spot in several minutes.

Baerelt follows his gaze to the same patch of darkness, out in the fathomless tundra of the Hvitir.

Torvur unslings his shield, a wooden circle wrapped in leather with a heavy knuckle-like boss. He looks eager. Afraid. The cold forgotten.

‘Laggenuf…’ says Torvur. He wants the light and doesn’t want the light, Baerelt realises. If he sees what’s out there, he can fight it but then he’ll also have to acknowledge that it *is* something and not just a trick of the wind. This deep, this bad a storm. Nothing sane wanders these wastes.

Well, nothing sane except four Vusslenk clansmen on the hunt.

It took a village. Just one at first. Slaughtered the inhabitants and left them steaming amidst the ice. Lying on red snow.

Then it was two villages, and then a third. The ferocity of it. The sheer speed. Its trail was baffling. Vusslenk has stockade walls and a broad river on its northern border. Hills shoulder the south, watchmen posted amongst their crags. They had offered some protection. A warning. Still, it had taken several of their kin. Slain six watchmen and another six warriors of the clan before it retreated from their spears. Baerelt’s only son. Torvur’s brothers. Laggenuf’s grandfather. Ulfvye lost his wife. He had been grim before, but now he cuts a fell figure in the ice and frost.

‘Leave the fire, Laggenuf,’ says Baerelt, unslinging his spear and standing by his clansmen.

The wind is rising.

‘Can’t hear it any more…’ murmurs Ulfvye, clutching that spear of his. A fine spear. His best, he said.

‘Hear what?’ asks Torvur, glaring at the dark from behind his shield. ‘*Skitja!* I can’t hear a damn thing.’

Baerelt gently lays a hand on the warrior's shoulder, and presses a finger to his own lips as Torvur turns to regard him.

*Listen*, the gesture says.

The wind howls, reaching a fever pitch that sets Baerelt's teeth on edge. He grimaces. It isn't just the wind.

Laggenuf gives up on the torch, leaves it gathering snow behind him, mounding up like a grave. He joins Baerelt, spear held in both hands, and shares an anxious look with the veteran hunter.

It comes then, resolving through the sleet and snow. A wizened thing, it looks female, naked to the bone and grey as old ice. Straggly hair hangs across its face, though only as far as the eyes and nose. Its mouth yawns, too wide, the teeth like nubs of coal. The tongue is black and dry as cured leather.

'Draugr…' Torvur almost drops his shield. It slips marginally in his grasp and he has to look down a moment as he retightens the grip.

The draugr is upon him in seconds, claws raking at his hastily upheld shield, splinters flying like the sparks Laggenuf failed to ignite on his torch. Baerelt wishes they had it now, for the winter is blacker than hel ice and the wailing wind disorientating. His spear throw arcs wide, the draugr wriggling from its powerful trajectory, but at least she's off Torvur. The hunter's shield is badly rent. Laggenuf attacks with a thrust, two-handed to keep the foe at bay. A defensive fighter, is Laggenuf. The draugr snaps his spear haft in two. She opens her maw, the gaping chasm of her mouth stretching until a gruesome wail peals from it.

Baerelt feels his teeth shaking, his jaw clenching shut. He resists the urge to clamp his ears, and manages to draw his axe. Laggenuf falls, bright red blood flecking his hair and beard, drooling from his nose and ears. He cries out, agonised, but the wailing smothers it. The draugr sweeps down at him, limbs bending in the opposite direction as if the joints are reversed. Needle-like fangs extrude, glistening with poison saliva. One bite and Laggenuf is bound for *mardrom*, the pain-dream. The spear jutting from her back prevents her finishing off her prey, Ulfvye having made the throw. Any mortal thing would be dead from a throw like that, Ulfvye's arm as thick as an iron-trunk.

It barely slows her down.

But Baerelt sees the ichor dripping and hissing as it melts the snow where

it touches. She’s wounded. A wild swipe of his axe and she’s lost a hand. Another shriek fills the air, but this one is galvanising.

*It can die*, Baerelt reminds himself as the draugr whips around the ice storm like a tossed flake of snow, flitting here and there, wary of her prey now.

Laggenuf has rolled drunkenly to his feet. Torvur helps him and they stagger to where Laggenuf dropped the torch.

Baerelt and Ulfvye try to herd the draugr between them as she weeps and wails and curses in a language no one has spoken on Fenris in centuries. A claw strips the pelts from Baerelt’s shoulders. It’s so fast he barely sees it, though that could also be the snow in his eyes. The pelts stop her from tearing through his arm. He backs off, his axe braced in both hands, loosely gripped and ready.

Meanwhile, Ulfvye has retrieved Baerelt’s cast spear and holds it at his shoulder like a harpoon. The storm thickens, ice and snow congealing in a white miasma. She’s close. Baerelt can smell her corpse stench. Hear the click and rasp of her bones…

The wail nearly fells him and he cracks a tooth as he grimaces. Instinct makes him lash out, a broad sweep of the blade that hits something brittle and embeds itself. The draugr is screaming, thrashing at the end of Baerelt’s axe, frantically clawing. It’s all he can do to keep her at bay and stop her from ripping off his face. A spear impales her right through the breastbone, down through the other side and into the frost-bitten earth. Ulfvye roars, driving the spear with such ferocious strength that he pins her.

She’s still not dead, even when Torvur plunges his sword down her gullet and severs that black worm of a tongue.

A flare of light draws Baerelt’s attention – Laggenuf with his torch. It gutters in the wind then the oil catches and the wood burns brightly. He douses the draugr in fire, letting it flicker over her corpse-dry skin. It might as well be parchment for the way the flames devour it hungrily. Her stifled screams are the things of nightmares but they die away as she dies, slowly burned, even her skeleton reduced to ash.

Baerelt is breathing hard, belatedly aware of the cold seeping into his bones and knowing he must recover his pelts from where the draugr tore them loose. Torvur has sunk into a crouch, his sword held at arm’s length as hot ichor drips from the blade. Ulfvye is coping better than most. He has

retrieved both his and Baerelt's spear. The haft of one is scorched but still serviceable. Laggenuf lingers over the corpse, which is now a black silhouette of ash rapidly disappearing under falling snow.

'Was that it?' asks Torvur, not just the question but the manner in which he asks it making it obvious his taste for the hunt has ebbed considerably.

Ulfvye hawks a gob of phlegm onto the ground. 'The beast that massacred Ilvik and Stepnir, and killed more than twenty men…'

Baerelt shakes his head. 'That's not it.'

Laggenuf still hasn't moved, as if expecting the draugr to reconstitute itself and rise from the dead again. It takes Baerelt's hand on his shoulder to rouse him from his fear.

'Told you I was almost there,' he says and holds up the torch to the storm.

Baerelt smiles, nods. 'I see a path ahead.'

The others see it too.

'And you'll be dead before you reach it without this,' says Ulfvye, proffering a cloak of furs. 'Always picking up after you, eh, Baerelt?'

'Looks like,' Baerelt replies, gratefully taking the pelts.

Ulfvye curses as he sees Laggenuf's broken haft on the ground. 'We needed that spear. It'll be harder without it.'

'You think this was easy?' asks Torvur, gesturing to gouges in his shield.

Ulfvye betrays the faintest hint of a smile. 'We're alive, aren't we?'

They leave the ashes of the draugr behind, just another of the many ways Fenris has to kill the weak. It's no place for the weak, for there are wolves on Fenris.

Baerelt had not thought it possible for the storm to worsen but worsen it does. They are standing at the foot of a narrow pass through the mountains, roped around the waist, one man tied to the next in train.

Laggenuf's torch is still flickering, though much of its vigour is diminished. He has the front, hand held above his eyes to keep out the snow as he tries to see what's ahead.

He turns, calling over his shoulder to Baerelt. 'No way through.'

Baerelt looks back the way they came, at the winding and treacherous slope, the chasmal plummet on one side.

This is where the trail has led them. They swore to find the beast. Kill it if they could.

‘*Skitja!*’

He scowls and Ulfvye, who is next in line, quickly catches on.

‘A cave…’ he says, after casting about, pointing with a fur-wrapped hand. The fine spear in his other hand is more a walking staff than a weapon. It’s a poor use for such a thing but a necessary one.

Baerelt sees the cave, a little farther down and tucked in from the side of the cliff.

‘How do we know it’s empty?’ shouts Torvur, his voice muffled behind the pelts swaddling most of his face.

‘We don’t,’ answers Baerelt, ‘but you are welcome to trek back down the mountain, if you wish.’

Torvur grumbles something under his breath and heads towards the cave.

It’s dry inside the cave and mercifully sheltered from the wind. If a beast has laired here, it has not done so for some time. There are no bones, no spoor. The cave is deep enough to admit all four hunters and allow a fire. Laggenuf gathers scraps of wood, detritus blown in by the storm, and enough kindling to get it burning. He keeps the fire low, just enough to stir the blood back into the hunters’ bodies. Not enough to draw unwanted attention.

Soon, it is warm enough to pull off their cloaks of furs and wrapped pelts. The hunters crouch around the fire, watchful but glad of shelter. Frost melts, garments dry, a little meat and drink is shared between the men. A little humour returns with it.

Torvur’s eyes are sharp and bright. Young.

‘How long will it last, do you think?’ he asks.

Baerelt drags his fingers through his short black beard. He’s tending a piece of dark meat on a spit. ‘Hours, at least. Maybe even a day?’

Laggenuf pokes at the fire, sending little sparks flurrying. His beard is as wild and red as the flames. ‘Long time. Long enough for a tale or two,’ he says, ‘take our minds off the storm.’

‘And what’s out there…’ Torvur remarks. Fair-haired, less grizzled than the others, he both looks and sounds the younger. ‘Assuming it still is,’ he adds, hopefully.

*Vim and vigour are just fine until one is called to use them for something dangerous*, thinks Baerelt and pities the youth for his fear.

‘It’s out there,’ Ulfvye confirms. He is standing at the mouth of the cave, just out of the wind, leaning against the rock. He chews a piece of uncooked, toughened meat. One hand is on his sword pommel and his grey locks whip like kraken tendrils. His spear is leaning too, and within reach. Not for the first time, Baerelt thinks he is a grim watchman.

‘You can’t be sure, Ulfvye,’ says Torvur. ‘It could have wandered off.’

‘It wants us to find it.’

‘Perhaps, after the storm,’ Torvur ventures, as if he hasn’t just heard what Ulfvye said, ‘we should turn back?’

Ulfvye turns. He turns so sharply and so fiercely that Torvur near jumps up in fright. There’s flint in the old watchman’s gaze and that blade of his has slid two finger-widths from its scabbard.

‘Speak of your cowardice again,’ he says to Torvur, his mouth a barricade of teeth, ‘see what happens.’

Torvur thinks to speak but Baerelt holds up a hand to silence him.

‘Come…’ he says. ‘Ulfvye, sit down by the fire with us. Laggenuf,’ he turns to the red-haired hunter, ‘give us a tale then. Let us be *skjalds*, sharing stories.’

Torvur sits back down, wary.

Ulfvye glares but joins them, deciding he’s seen enough of what lies beyond the cave. Baerelt passes him a skewer of meat, a cup of *mjod*, and the old watchman’s mood thaws enough for him to be civil.

‘*Takk*,’ he says, and gives a shallow nod in return.

Baerelt turns to Laggenuf. ‘Well then?’

Taking a heavy draught of his mjod and wiping the spilled drink with his sleeve, Laggenuf begins. ‘Do you know how the long winter came to Fenris?’ he asks.

‘Was it the frigid reception to your inane stories?’ growls Ulfvye.

Laggenuf ignores him. ‘He is called the Russ… A legend of old Fenris. Is he friend to man, or foe? I heard tell he is a giant with skin as white as the tundra, a beard of frost and eyes like chips of ice. Look upon them,’ says Laggenuf, ‘and even the stoutest warrior shall know fear. He stalks the old places still, the wind is his voice and the great snowdrifts his breath. And he is the last of his kind, for it is said the Russ once had a wife, a child and they were snow and frost like him but that the sun did slay them. In his grief, the Russ forged a spear of ice, so long and so deadly that it did wound

the sun and so forever does winter reign upon Fenris. And this is the legend of the Russ,' Laggenuf concludes, sitting back proudly.

Torvur frowns and then wags his finger, remonstrating.

'Close,' he says.

Laggenuf scowls. 'Close to what?'

'The truth, but you have not got it right, *skjald*.'

'It is the legend of the Russ,' says Laggenuf, incredulous at being challenged.

'Perhaps it is *a* legend, but it is not right,' says Torvur. 'My old *afi*, he knew of the Russ. Said he was not a creature at all, but a storm. *Jata*… his voice is the wind, his breath the snow, whatever. But he *is* the storm. He is the winter's bite, the eternal cold. He is the last storm. An elemental. The world spirit of Fenris itself. *That*,' Torvur declares triumphantly, 'is the Russ.'

'Skitja…' murmurs Ulfvye, shaking his head. He wears a disdainful look, like he wants to spit.

'What do you say, brother?' asks Laggenuf.

Ulfvye near shouts. 'I say it is shit! Swine's balls! *Skitja!*' He leans back, an indulgent smile creasing his old scars. 'Pair of goat rutters,' he says, quieter, calmer as he settles into his tale. 'Everyone knows that Russ is neither storm nor giant, shit for brains. He is a black wolf, a *vargr*. He is death and judgement. He follows men through underworld paths, unseen by mortal eyes.' Ulfvye looks around the cave theatrically, taking in the shadows. 'He might be here… right now!' he whispers, half hiding another smile as Torvur glances over his shoulder and even Laggenuf shuffles surreptitiously closer to the fire.

'It is said, by those who speak the truth,' Ulfvye continues, 'that men will see the Russ when death is upon them, that his howl is the harbinger of endings. For if the black wolf marks your scent, your fate is assured.' He rummages in his woollen coat, takes out a long-handled smoking pipe stuffed with *angelikarot* and lights it. Yellow-green smoke curls from the bole, wreathing his wizened features, the fire giving his eyes a feral cast. 'And *that*,' he says, leaning back against his pack, smoking, his feet pushed towards the flames, 'is the story of the Russ.'

Torvur scowls, regarding Ulfvye from under downcast eyes, but says nothing. Laggenuf grumbles, and pokes at the fire. It is fading, the hunters

sharing the last of its heat. They will not light another. As it turns to embers, their last glow lighting the cave, Baerelt speaks.

‘My father told me he was a man, like us.’

‘That is not much of a legend,’ remarks Laggenuf, ‘or a story for that matter.’

‘Perhaps it is not storms or giants or dread wolves, but I believe it has a greater ring of truth. Russ was a king, a clan lord, though none know of his provenance or why he is no longer seen on Fenris.’

‘Maybe he is dead?’ suggests Torvur, ‘slain by his rivals or by wolves.’

‘It is said that Russ *is* a wolf,’ Baerelt continues. ‘Not some lycanthrope or changeling, but rather in spirit. Feral, proud, fearless.’

‘And no doubt never bested in battle,’ says Ulfvye. ‘A peerless warrior and a just king?’

‘So my father told me,’ answers Baerelt.

‘Bah!’ sneers Ulfvye and gestures to Torvur. ‘Your story is no better than that clod’s. Fine kings and noble warriors… *Skitja!*’ He rolls onto his side, his pack a pillow for his head, and promptly begins to snore.

Laggenuf is coaxing the last scraps of warmth from the fire’s embers. ‘At least you could have made it good, Baerelt. Some skjald you make.’ He sounds disappointed as he reaches for a blanket.

‘Just for that,’ says Torvur, getting wrapped up again in his furs, ‘you can take first watch.’

Baerelt smiles as his companions go to their rest. He doesn’t mind the silence and the solitude.

*They’re right*, he thinks to himself as he sits facing the mouth of the cave, his eyes on the white darkness before him as the wind howls and winter vents her fury, *I am not much of a skjald*.

They find the next village just after noon. By morning the pass had thawed enough for the hunters to reach the uplands beyond. The landscape is flat, and the village’s name is Onka, or rather it *was*.

Devastation has torn through it, flattening huts and leaving bodies in its wake. If Baerelt did not know any better, he would have said raiders had done this but even raiders take cattle or prisoners. In Onka nothing has been spared. Man and beast alike lie butchered, torn apart like offal. Blood drowns what remains, a great lake of it edged with glistening hoarfrost in

the heart of the village. Huge splinters from the sundered huts stick up from the red like rotten bones.

A man has crawled several feet from the slaughter. Ulfvye drops to his haunches to inspect gouges in the man's back that have torn through leather and ringmail like sail cloth. A broken shield lies nearby, flung from the dead man's grasp. A shattered sword is clenched in his frozen-corpse fingers.

'Hel…' murmurs Ulfvye as he turns the dead man onto his back and they all see the way terror has contorted his face.

He is not alone. Others are armed too, several strewn about the perimeter. Some are missing limbs. Heads. More still have been gorged upon, the horror slowly unravelling the longer the hunters look. Glistening entrails piled alongside rope, one barely distinguishable from the other. Fingers gnawed upon. A foot without its boot, without its leg.

'This one has been split open,' offers Laggenuf, standing a metre away from Ulfvye, 'liver, stomach, heart, lungs… all gone. Eaten.'

Somewhere in the background, Torvur is violently sick.

Ulfvye has barely moved but to turn the man over. He observes, measures, concludes.

'They were ready for it,' he says in the end. 'See how the warriors made a line?' He gestures to the dead, to their broken, mutilated forms, but Baerelt sees it in their arrangement.

The air reeks of cold copper and salt sweat.

'A shield wall,' he utters.

Ulfvye nods. 'And it did them no good. Must be twenty warriors here… bondsmen, shield maidens, huscarls.'

'We should turn back,' says Torvur, wiping the bile from his mouth.

Baerelt doesn't meet his gaze. 'We cannot.'

'It is *maleficarum*,' Torvur whispers, as if scared to say the word aloud. 'Onka, Stepnir… how did it slaughter so many, so quickly? Only a baleful spirit could do such a thing.'

Ulfvye stands and faces the young hunter.

'Your brothers died to this beast. Laggenuf's grandfather. Baerelt's wife…' he says, before rasping, his voice thick with grief, '*My own son…*'

Torvur has tears in his eyes. He wants to run.

Ulfvye grips him hard by the shoulder, old fingers digging in like claws and making the young hunter wince.

‘Our *kin*…’ utters the watchman. ‘It is no spirit, you fool. It is flesh and blood. And death. And we have to face it or it will keep on killing until there’s nothing left to kill.’

‘I’m afraid,’ Torvur replies, and bows his head. Shamed.

Ulfvye’s voice softens but not so much it loses its edge. ‘You think I’m not?’ He gestures to the others. ‘That Laggenuf is not? And Baerelt?’ The others look on, their silence answering for them, so Ulfvye continues. ‘This is our fate, Torvur. Our thread is drawn. It cannot be unmade or pulled anew. A man has his *wyrd* and that is all there is to it,’ he says firmly but not unkindly. Perhaps he believes what Torvur said, that the beast is no natural thing but something else, some old monster, many times worse than the draugr. An eater of men, flesh and soul. Some fell spirit.

‘You could flee,’ says Ulfvye, ‘but your wyrd would find you all the same.’

‘I don’t want to die out here,’ Torvur confesses in a small voice. ‘Not to some nameless horror of the Hvitir.’

A metre away, Laggenuf makes a warding sign with his hands.

Baerelt’s jaw clenches.

Ulfvye looks forbidding as the shadows play across his wizened face. ‘And yet death will claim you anyway.’

A cold breeze stirs, bringing with it a scent that makes Baerelt’s nose prickle. He sniffs, scowls. Laggenuf has already turned, his hunting bow in hand, his instincts sharper than most. The bow is for game, not monsters, but he’s forced to use it to defend himself now that his spear is gone. He sinks low, into a crouch. Nocks an arrow. His eyes flick to Baerelt, who slowly draws his axe.

There is something alive, deeper in the village. The scent of sweat and animal musk thickens the air, carried on the breeze.

Ulfvye puts a gnarled finger to his lips, spear held ready, and urges the others to advance.

They circle around where they caught the creature’s scent: Baerelt goes with Laggenuf to the left, whilst Ulfvye and Torvur range right. More bodies are strewn further in, not fighters but children and old folk. Rent and gored just the same. Flesh is flesh to the belly of the beast.

A great hall lies at the heart of the village, the doors broken open and

reduced to splinters. Across its threshold the shadows deepen, stretching like long, thin fingers. Half the roof has fallen in, a profusion of tumbled straw and wood. It looks burned, as if it were afire at some point. Baerelt glances down at small bones that crunch underfoot. He's relieved when he hears Laggenuf's muttered wardings against maleficarum behind him.

He doesn't speak aloud. Neither of them do. His breathing is a bellows pull, heaving in his chest. He tries to stay calm, but his hammering heart won't let him. It feels hot in the great hall like warm breath, though the hearth fire is cold and dead like everything else. Grey light spills in from somewhere other than the broken roof. A second doorway, also smashed, stands opposite the first. It's a gaping arch of stone, shards of shattered wood jutting from it like rough spears. It puts Baerelt in mind of a toothed maw.

Ulfvye and Torvur edge through the second doorway, the old watchman taking the lead, only looking back to scowl at the youth as he snags his jerkin on a large splinter and lets out a yelp of pain.

It's in here. Baerelt can feel it. The great hall is large and cluttered with debris. Plenty of places to hide, but he doubts very much it's hiding. *A lair*, he thinks…

Statues of old gods, the deities of Fenris, line the hall. Armour and pelts fashioned in wood. Blood-flecked, chipped. Two have fallen, one onto its face, the head broken off as if having rolled from the executioner's block. The other is shorter, fallen from its plinth. It takes Baerelt a moment to realise the second statue is not a statue at all.

'*Skitja!*' Laggenuf looses an arrow, fingers slipping in fright as the huge thing rises from a crouch before him then… It plucks the shaft from the air. Ulfvye falters; his spear is aloft and over his shoulder but he doesn't throw it.

Torvur stays his ground but goes no further. Baerelt can see in his eyes that the fair-haired youth is close to bolting. He tries to urge him not to. *Hold fast*, he thinks, the words echoing desperately in his mind, and not just for Torvur. The axe feels slick in his grasp, like there's oil on the haft. It's not oil, it's fear-sweat as he faces down the creature.

It *towers* over the hunters, muscular body shining like dark marble. Thick fur swathes its head and shoulders. Its eyes are bright and sharp like cut amber, the pupils so large and wide that Baerelt knows it must see as clear

as day in the dingy hall. See them. Smell them.

Hot breath ghosts the air, like thin smoke pluming from its mouth. Fangs glisten. The mouth curves, curling into a feral grin as it regards the hunters.

‘Here…’ it says, tossing the snatched arrow back to Laggenuf, ‘loosed by mistake, I think, *Fenryka*.’

Baerelt is struck by the depth of its voice and the fact it uses language at all.

The feral grin deepens and there’s threat in it, masked behind that humour. ‘At least I *hope* it was.’

It stoops to retrieve a huge pelt, draping it across its massive frame. And as the light touches it, Baerelt realises it’s not a beast, at least not the one they seek; it’s a man. A huge man.

‘It’s fled, or rather moved on,’ says the man.

A massive axe sits embedded in the hall floor. An old weapon, master-forged and wrought by an artisan. It looks stout, the haft smooth and well worn. The runes on the blade briefly flicker like captured fire. Like star fire. It must be as long as a man, and twice as thick.

The man grips the haft and wrenches it loose with a desultory jerk of his wrist.

‘You can lower your weapons, Fenryka. Unless you *do* wish to fight…’ It brandishes the axe. ‘It would be over quickly.’

Torvur takes a backward step. Ulfvye’s knuckles are white and his arm is shaking as he struggles to keep his spear raised.

‘What are you?’ rasps Baerelt. As he lowers his axe, the others follow his lead.

‘Ah, so you *can* speak…’

An icy fist seizes Baerelt’s chest as the man’s gaze falls upon him. It seems to measure him, gauge his worth, and in those few seconds he hopes to all the gods that he isn’t found wanting. He turns away, about to move on.

‘Are you *jotun*?’ asks Laggenuf, finding his courage and his tongue.

‘A giant?’ The man stops and laughs, loudly, his bellow echoing around the great hall. Outside, carrion crows scatter. Then he grows more serious, as if actually contemplating whether he is or isn’t. In the end he decides, ‘I suppose I am. Of sorts. Jotun.’

‘Are you from a tribe?’ asks Laggenuf, his timbre a little higher-pitched than usual.

‘A great tribe.’

Ulfvye steps forward, having regained his composure. ‘You hunt the beast…’ he declares boldly. ‘We also hunt it.’

Jotun turns his fierce gaze on Ulfvye, and Baerelt sees the old watchman tremble despite all his vast experience.

‘Go home,’ Jotun tells them, turning away again and stomping through the shadowy hall. ‘Back to your kin.’

Baerelt steps into Jotun’s path. His breath almost catches but anger pushes out the words for him.

‘Our kin are dead. We want to kill it. Avenge them.’

Jotun glares at him for what feels like ages but in fact is only seconds. The tension in the hall is thick as hoarfrost.

‘Then hunt with me, and we shall see it done. You’ll have your vengeance.’

Ulfvye calls out from the other side. ‘Its spoor ends here. I saw no tracks. Nothing. The snow has covered it. How will we find the beast?’

Jotun smiles, and it’s a deeply unsettling expression in the circumstances. ‘We follow the wolves.’

Baerelt hears the howling before he sees them. Onka is far behind, lost to the thickening drifts spilling off the high mountains as they track further into the uplands. The Hvitir is somewhere below, hidden by banks of iron-grey cloud that promise sleet. Ahead are the slow, padding silhouettes of beasts. The *herravargr*, a pair of grey wolves. Even from distance, with the flicking tongue of Laggenuf’s torch offering its light, Baerelt has never seen wolves this large. They are monstrous, but they are misplaced out on the rocky scarp.

‘Something has driven them out,’ says Ulfvye, spear clenched to his chest.

*Follow the wolves.* The words return to Baerelt as a pair becomes four, becomes six, an encircling pack that surrounds the hunters on the sparse plateau. No vantage, no place to hide or defend.

The howling deepens, turns into a united growl that suggests hunger, the killing urge.

‘Make a circle,’ barks Baerelt, ushering Torvur around and pushing Laggenuf into position.

The herravargr are wary, and loiter at the edge of Laggenuf’s torchlight.

But it’s not the fire that’s keeping them at bay, it’s Jotun. He is ahead of the hunters and not within their circle. They only caught up to him because he had stopped to read the spoor of the wolves. He had followed it all the way from the village. Or perhaps he could scent them. Baerelt cannot tell, he is too exhausted. And now he must fight.

Jotun has drawn his axe, a sickle smile of a blade catching the fire’s shimmer and making it dazzle along the metal.

‘Back to back, Fenryka…’ he tells the hunters, with nary a sideways glance. His eyes are on the grey wolves. *Perhaps they recognise a kindred spirit*, thinks Baerelt as the circle of hunters shuffles this way and that, as the predators slither and slink around them.

The largest beast has a mane of pure white hair running down its back, and snarls a challenge.

Jotun snarls back. And the herravargr attack.

Four, including white mane, leap for Jotun together and he is lost to a flurry of fur, fang and claw. The axe rises, falls. A spray paints the icy bluff dark red. A plaintive yelp echoes.

Baerelt loses sight of the battle after that. The other two herravargr come for the hunters. Ulfvye thrusts with his spear as Laggenuf flails with sword and flame. Torvur cries out, near mad with terror as a beast rakes his shield. That redoubtable shield, half split but still clinging on. He stabs, thick hide turning the blade, a glancing blow that skids harmlessly across a grey wolf’s pelt. A second lunges for Ulfvye, batting the spear tip aside with a huge paw, teeth bared until Laggenuf’s flame sears its snout. The wolf recoils, snarls. Ulfvye’s spear impales air. The first comes again, a blur of teeth and claw. Baerelt grips Torvur’s shoulder, holding the hunter steady but keeping Torvur’s shield facing the wolves. A claw tears new furrows in the abused leather and wood. Baerelt catches it with his blade, hacks off a hooked claw nail with his opportunistic slash. Red beads scatter upon the snow-frosted scarp like little rubies.

Ulfvye cries out, the first wolf upon them again. He falls back, spear extended like a banner pole, carrying the herravargr as it arcs over his head and scatters the hunters’ defensive circle. It’s wounded but deadlier now. The spear still impaled in its flank, it crushes Ulfvye’s arm in its jaws and throws him bodily across the bluff. Laggenuf is struck by the old watchman’s trailing leg and drops the torch. The fire snuffs out, doused by

the ice in an eye-blink. Darkness descends, a disorientating shroud. Baerelt heaves his axe into the grey wolf's skull. It mewls, now dying, whimpering. The second wolf hits him, knocks him skidding across the slope, scattering Torvur too. His shield skips away, a skimmed stone flung over the edge to be swallowed by the iron-grey cloud.

An arrow finds its mark in the second wolf, in its hindquarters. A second shaft scrapes its ribs, drawing blood.

Baerelt is dazed, numbed. Ulfvye has not risen. Torvur is staggering, sword loose and wandering like a diviner in his punch-drunk grip. Laggenuf faces down the wolf. A last arrow nocked to his bow. A gash jags across his forehead and the blood slowly runs down his face.

The herravargr emits a low growl, rising in pitch to an anguished whine at its dead mate now slumped upon the scarp.

Baerelt's booted feet dangle over the edge of the cliff, right where Torvur's shield went. He scrambles, reaching for the axe he dropped, reaching for Laggenuf. But it's already too late.

The arrow flies in tandem with the wolf, but the shaft skitters away, the aim poor, the hide too thick.

Laggenuf seems to sag, eyes closing as he accepts his fate…

A slab of muscled meat intercepts the death lunge. Ribs break audibly, a spine snaps as the grey wolf is carried away in a steel-sprung grip. Baerelt has only just climbed to his feet when he sees Jotun and wolf, locked in an embrace. A savage twist, as the giant stares calmly into its eyes, and it's all over.

He murmurs something, Jotun. It takes Baerelt a moment to realise the words are not for him but for the dead wolf. The rest of the pack lies slumped in the shadows at the edge of the ice scarp. They almost appear as if they're sleeping, for he hasn't butchered them.

Blood-flecked, steam rising off his bare skin, Jotun turns his stormy gaze to Baerelt.

'Follow the wolves…' he says, and gestures with a crimson-slick axe to the lowlands beyond the bluff. Iron-grey cloud parts just enough for a forest to reveal itself a few kilometres below. 'They should never have been out here. It is not their place.'

'I do not think,' says Baerelt, breathless but alive, 'that it is our place either.'

Jotun replies with a sad smile, turns and moves on.

The descent into the lowlands, over the ice scarp, is slow and hard. Ulfvye lives but his left arm is a ruin, flesh torn but hastily bandaged, the bones likely broken and held together by an improvised splint.

The old watchman doesn't complain but all can see his pain in the grim set of his jaw, his ever-paling skin. Baerelt calls a halt about halfway down the slope, where the foliage has thickened and the sleet hits them like knives of ice.

'He needs rest,' he calls to Jotun, who has ranged ahead of the others. The giant turns, grunts something and then rejoins the hunters.

They take shelter, spare cloaks strung over a copse of trees to keep out the worst of the wind and the sleet. It's already laden with slow-melting snow, the roof bulging as Laggenuf manages to stir a fire to life.

None speak. They stare into the wan flames, all except Ulfvye, whose eyes are closed.

Wrapped up in cloaks and pelts, the hunters huddle close and contemplate what might remain of their journey.

'Do you not feel the cold, Jotun?' asks Laggenuf, a slight shiver in his words as he breaks the solemn silence.

Wild eyes glint like gemstones from the edge of the firelight, glittering in penumbral darkness.

'Not as you do,' says Jotun in a wet leopard growl.

'Will you join us though,' presses Laggenuf, 'here by the fire? If you don't need to share its warmth then perhaps you would share a story as each of us have?'

Jotun's eyes narrow, curious then amused. He rises from a crouched position and sits by the fire. Up close, he is immense and the stillness of him feels temporary, just a prelude to violence. His skin is leathern but almost numinous and a flaxen mane spills across his shoulders. A canine stink pervades but does nothing to lessen the aura of power. And there is something else too, something unidentifiable. Oil, metal, frost? Baerelt cannot tell which.

'You are skjalds as well as hunters,' remarks Jotun, exuding a little warmth in response to Laggenuf's bonhomie. 'What story would you have me tell, Fenryka?'

‘What about one of the Russ?’ says Laggenuf, handing Jotun a cup of mjod. ‘Have you heard of him?’

Jotun nods as he takes the proffered cup, and Baerelt swears he detects a slight curling at the edges of his mouth as the giant licks his lips.

‘Aye, I have heard of him.’

Torvur speaks up, the first words he has uttered since they set up camp, the first time in a while his eyes have not been far away, rooted in fear.

‘Laggenuf says he is a frost giant, as big as a mountain.’

‘I never said he was as big as a mountain!’

‘And Torvur here believes he is a storm, the fiercest of elementals,’ remarks Baerelt.

Jotun laughs, deep and unearthly. The hunters laugh back nervously.

‘And no doubt this one,’ he gestures to Ulfvye with his empty cup, ‘tells a tale of a black wolf, the largest ever known to Fenris.’

The hunters pause, stunned. Ulfvye still sleeps fitfully, so Laggenuf answers for him.

‘Yes,’ he says, bemused and a little awestruck, ‘that is exactly right.’

‘All false,’ says Jotun with just a hint of iron in his eyes. ‘The Russ, he was raised by wolves.’ He holds up two thick fingers. ‘And had two wolf brothers. He did not know the world of man, but he came to know it. To know their iron and stone. One harsh winter, when food was scarce, Russ and his kin raided a village so they could eat. But the villagers were starving too. They fought off the wolves, but Russ protected his brothers so fiercely that none fell to spears or swords. They fled, back into the wild, but the king of these lands sent warriors after the wolves. He harried them, hunted them and killed the pack.

‘Russ, he was struck many times by arrows and spears but refused to die. Weakened, he was bound in thick ropes and brought before the king. But upon seeing a man and not a wolf before him, the king spared Russ. He took him in and gave him his name, Leman, and made him a part of his tribe. From the king and his people, he learned the ways of axe and spear, of man’s world. He never forgot the wolves or the wildness of Fenris, for each was a part of him.

‘When the king died, as all kings must eventually, Russ assumed his throne and his mantle. And there he remained, a great king, until one day a stranger came to his lands proclaiming himself the “Master of Mankind”.’

He laughs, though there is no humour in it. ‘Can you imagine that? Claiming such a thing? Disdainful of the stranger’s arrogance, Russ challenged him and said he would not bow down to any master.’ Jotun’s eyes flash. ‘He bested the stranger in all but one contest. Thus defeated, Russ saw the truth in the stranger’s words, that He was indeed the Master of Mankind, and swore to serve Him loyally until the universe grew cold. And so Russ learned again, of worlds beyond Fenris, and of the far reaches of the stars. And sometimes he travels those stars, fighting for this master, but he has never forgotten Fenris and returns to her often for the winter, for the wolves. To remember who he was and from where he came.’

A hush descends…

Until Laggenuf bursts out laughing. The others follow, emboldened by his recklessness. Then Jotun laughs, and it is a deep and booming mirth that echoes around the lowlands like thunder.

‘Aye,’ he says, stilling his chuckling, ‘it is a far-fetched tale.’

‘Very imaginative…’ says Laggenuf, wiping tears from his eyes. He stretches and yawns, scratching at his armpit as he settles down to his bedroll.

Torvur nods awkwardly, the old fear returned, as he goes to his rest too.

It leaves only Baerelt, as Ulfvye has not stirred since they made camp. He’s rebinding the leather haft of his axe that came loose during the skirmish against the herravargr. It’s painstaking work and as he silently goes about his task, he watches Jotun from the corner of his eye. The giant has retreated from the fire again, as if a part of him is wary of its light, and sits alone, lost to his thoughts.

‘What was your tale, skjald?’ he asks, and Baerelt looks up, into those feral eyes. He sees the wildness there but also something more, something… noble.

‘I said that Russ was a king with the heart of a wolf.’

Jotun sniffs, and scratches his nose.

‘Not as fantastical as your kinsmen… What makes you think that?’

‘My father.’

‘Ah… Fathers and their sons, eh? Never simple. My own father told me stories, great stories, fantastical stories, of my brothers and their ways, of my place in the world.’

‘Are your brothers much like you?’

‘In some ways they are, in others… very much not. But I love them, despite our differences, as all siblings should love each other. Do you have brothers, skjald?’

Baerelt shakes his head. ‘No, it was just my father and I. My mother, I barely knew. She died when I was young.’

‘And what of your father then, does he live still? You speak of him like he is dead. Did the beast slay him?’

‘He died, yes, but three winters past. I lost my son to the beast. His name was Juvik.’

‘I’m sorry, skjald. That’s no fate.’

Baerelt nods as if that makes it any easier or more fathomable. ‘Do you have children, Jotun?’ he asks, ‘A wife?’

At this Jotun gives a shrug of the shoulders. ‘No wife, but I have sons.’

Having stumbled upon some common ground, Baerelt edges closer, ‘Two, three?’

Another smile, this one half-hidden but not very well. ‘More than three,’ Jotun says, and there’s a glint of something in his eyes that Baerelt mistakes for rakish pride.

‘And you love them?’

‘Some more than others, but, yes, I love them.’

Baerelt’s expression hardens then, day turning into night. ‘So you know why I must hunt this beast and kill it.’

‘I do,’ says Jotun. ‘I would do anything for my sons. *Anything*. We want so much for them, our sons. Don’t we? In them, we see ourselves reflected. Our virtues magnified, our flaws hidden. So much is bound up in them. So much,’ he says, almost melancholy. Then he suddenly leans forwards and the firelight catches his face, haunting it with shadows. He looks almost lupine in the half-light. Predatory. ‘Tell me though… Did you see it? The beast?’

‘I only heard it. I was too late to face the creature.’

‘But it *was* a creature?’

‘I can only assume.’

‘What did it sound like? Was it…’ he pauses, as if carefully measuring his words, ‘like a wolf?’

‘Like no wolf I have ever heard. I know of no beast or creature like it. It sounded… *unnatural*.’

Jotun retreats back to the shadows, as if satisfied with the hunter's answers but not alluding to why. He seems deep in thought and as he muses on some dark imagining, Baerelt is struck by Jotun's sheer *otherness*.

'You're not looking for the beast, are you?' he realises suddenly.

Jotun stares back, as if deciding what to say. In the end he simply utters, 'No, but I will.'

They say nothing further and after the haft of his axe is bound tightly in leather, Baerelt tries to stay up and keep a watch. On the dark beyond the camp or on Jotun, he can't say. Fatigue takes him eventually, the lids of his eyes drooping like lowered shields. And through the last cracks of fading firelight, he thinks he begins to dream and sees Jotun watching him intently. But it's not the figure of a man at the fire's edge, but rather that of a huge black wolf…

The outskirts of the forest loom like an unspoken threat, a place of arboreal shadows and primordial gloom. It is old, this place, and thick with briars and firs. Bracken snaps underfoot, scaring off some distant rooks roosting in the dense canopy above. They skitter off, their bird cries like human screams.

A thin mist carpets the forest floor, hiding its debris and spoor but not the man slumped against a deep bole. At least, Baerelt *thinks* it is a man. He is hirsute along the arms, chest and back, and naked from the waist up. His face and scalp is festooned with thick, dark hair. His chest is torn, the savage rips in his flesh like ghastly red smiles. He's barely breathing, and as his heavy-lidded eyes flicker they flash the same amber hue as Jotun's.

The giant crouches by the dying man's side, a hand laid gently on the slow rise and fall of his body to calm him.

'What manner of creature is this?' rasps Ulfvye, and Baerelt hears the frailty in his voice.

The old watchman had risen stiffly at dawn with the others, his face as pale as winter ice. He took a little broth, that which Laggenuf had prepared, but nothing else, eager to be back to the hunt. He stands by Baerelt's side, leaning heavily on his spear.

'It's an *ulfwerener*,' says Laggenuf in a hushed whisper. 'Half man, half wolf…'

'The beast that massacred Onka…?' murmurs Torvur.

‘This isn’t what ripped through Onka,’ says Ulfvye, ‘or Ilvik and Stepnir.’

‘Then what is it?’ asks Torvur in a sharp hiss.

‘My kin,’ growls Jotun to the hunters ringed around him, apparently having heard every word. They stand a few paces back, wary of the hirsute man that Jotun claims as kin. Laggenuf and Torvur exchange an uneasy glance. Baerelt notes the ulfwerener’s hands, the clawed fingers thick with blood. Tufts of hair jut from under the nails.

‘He fought it,’ he realises, ‘the beast that slaughtered Onka and the others.’

Jotun nods. ‘It’s close,’ he declares, rising, ‘and wounded.’

Laggenuf frowns, his gaze unmoving from the ulfwerener. ‘How can you be certain of that? There are many creatures in the forest.’

‘Not that can do this. Besides…’ Jotun growls, ‘I can smell its blood.’

‘What should we do with him?’ asks Baerelt, gesturing to the grievously wounded ulfwerener.

Jotun unhitches his axe. ‘Nothing. Either he lives or he dies. That is for his wyrd to decide. I cannot make or unmake his fate.’

‘You would just leave him like this?’

‘Stay, leave, it doesn’t matter in the end,’ says Jotun, not answering the question, but his gaze lingering on the stricken ulfwerener before he stalks off into the darkness, the hunters forgotten.

‘Should we go after him?’ asks Laggenuf, wavering at the threshold of action, nervous at the half-dead lycanthrope in their midst.

‘In there…?’ asks Torvur, fearful.

‘It’s a forest, Torvur. You have seen a forest before,’ utters Ulfvye. The old watchman is already moving, stiffly, his spear a crutch in his bone-white hands. ‘You can’t escape your wyrd,’ he calls, slowly disappearing into the foliage, ‘none of us can.’

Baerelt moves to go after him but Torvur’s hand on his arm stops him.

‘Nothing good lives in there, Baerelt,’ he says. ‘Can’t you feel it? A wrongness…’

Baerelt feels it right enough. He feels it in the cold sweat on the back of his neck, the sick dread in his gut, the prickling of his skin like little disquieting sparks of fear.

‘Let me go, Torvur. We made oaths, our wyrd is spun, the thread made.’

‘We should return to Vusslenk,’ says Torvur.

‘And do what, exactly?’ Baerelt snaps. ‘Cower in our beds, hide behind

our walls and hope the beast is slain? Is that it?'

'Jotun and ulfwerener… monsters and myths, Baerelt,' says Torvur. 'It is not the realm of men. We have no place in it.'

'And yet here we are. We do not get to choose, Torvur. I have no wish to be out here in this godsforsaken forest, charging into darkness, but I will do it because I swore to do it and when there are gods and monsters abroad, when our worlds are no longer separate, what has any man really got but his oath?'

Torvur lets him go, but shakes his head.

Laggenuf goes after him as he heads back up the slope before Baerelt calls him off.

'Let him be, Laggenuf.'

For a moment Laggenuf looks like he might follow, but then he nods and he and Baerelt plunge into the forest gloom.

They find Ulfvye leaning against the trunk of a thick tree. His spear appears to prop him up on the opposite side, and he seems to be staring at something in the darkness.

Baerelt slows to draw his axe. He had cleaned the blade when he'd rethreaded the haft, and it glints in the hazy shafts that pierce the thick arboreal firmament.

'Ulfvye…' he hisses, wondering how he will pick up Jotun's trail once the hunters are reunited, but the old watchman doesn't respond. It's darker here in the heart of the forest, and the soft chirruping of its fauna has faded to an abject and unsettling silence. A breath held, but for what?

Baerelt slowly edges towards Ulfvye, his gaze roaming the shadows for any sign of movement, any betrayal of a nearby presence. When he's close enough, he reaches for the old watchman.

'What is it, old man?' he asks. 'What have you–'

Ulfvye slides against the tree, his legs collapsing the moment a little pressure is placed upon him. Eyes grey as flint and just as dead stare out. Dried blood has seeped from under his tunic, his wounding more serious than any of them realised.

'Laggenuf,' he says, 'it's Ulfvye, he's…'

As Baerelt casts a glance over his shoulder, he sees Laggenuf bolting through the forest the opposite way. The sight of the dead watchman has

broken him.

Baerelt considers following him, heeding Torvur’s urging and heading back to Vusslenk. A roar from deep in the forest hardens his resolve. He has heard it before. At Vusslenk, echoing above the screaming, then haunting his dreams with the ululating of the bereaved. It had taken Stepnir and Ilvik and Onka, slaughtering more than eighty. And now he thinks on it, alone, as that roar shakes the forest in its primitive fury, Baerelt cannot conceive of how it managed such a feat. Its meandering spoor, the sheer speed and ferocity of its kills… Impossible. Unless it is a supernatural thing after all, some revenant creature birthed into the realm of man. It doesn’t matter. None of it matters now. Gently laying Ulfvye’s body against the tree, he closes the old watchman’s eyes and takes up his spear. Ulfvye has left it for him, his finest spear. Baerelt is determined to honour it with the hunter’s gift. A kill.

The roar echoes again, deep and booming like the crashing of waves or the bellow of a storm wind. Leaves shake as the forest recoils.

Heart thudding like arrows hitting a shield, Baerelt sets off after the sound. His axe is sheathed, the spear held high up the haft and in one hand as he ploughs through bracken-threaded darkness. He’s bleeding when he emerges on the other side, tiny gashes in his flesh as he stands breathless in a gloomy clearing. What he sees defies belief.

It is huge. A monstrous, colossal thing standing legs astride and upon its hindquarters as it faces off against Jotun. The giant is bleeding too, and his axe lies far away, smashed from his grasp and embedded in the earth.

His opponent has the rough shape of a bear, only far larger. A patchwork of saurian scales litter its back and shoulders. Thorny antlers sharper than swords and longer than Baerelt’s borrowed spear protrude from its sloping brow. It has claws, and its muscular body is swathed in a thick hide the colour of dark ash. It bleeds too, and emits an angry roar from its flat-snouted mouth as it bears down on Jotun.

A second roar joins the first, a little farther off, and Baerelt understands at last as he sees the beast’s mate burst through the forest wall. Not a spirit… a pair.

Jotun backs up a step, glances to his axe then back to his foes.

The male charges, the one Jotun has already bloodied. The beast collapses onto all fours, legs pounding the earth, shaking it. Jotun jumps aside before

he is crushed, then lunges back as the beast barrels past, seizing the razored antlers. Blood oozes down Jotun's wrists but he holds on, twisting and pushing, veins bulging like corded rope. The strain is evident in the flush of his skin and the grunt of effort that follows as he wrenches the beast down.

The female is on him before he can finish the task, a claw swipe opening up Jotun's shoulder to the bone. He cries out but holds on still, pulling at the thrashing male and keeping it prone as he twists. He barely evades another swipe, a glancing blow shredding his cheek and turning it red.

Then Baerelt is running, thought and action untethered as instinct takes over. He turns his headlong dash into a charge and throw, using his momentum to cast Ulfvye's spear as hard as he can. It strikes the female, the finest cast he's ever made, sinking a foot deep into her shoulder blade and tearing an agonised bellow from her malformed snout.

She turns, searching for the gnat that has bitten her, and finds Baerelt unslinging his axe and preparing to die.

Jotun cannot intervene. He wrestles the male, the bucking becoming more violent and desperate the further he turns the neck.

The female comes for Baerelt, her mate forgotten in the red haze of anger. She charges, head down, not with antlers but a thick plate of bony nubs that will smash the hunter into jelly. Baerelt readies his axe in the seconds he has left. He hopes his sacrifice is not in vain. He hears howling, just on the edge of the breeze and wonders if it is a presage of the afterlife.

He says a prayer to the gods, and promises his son that he will see him soon.

Inevitability closes, a hurricane of tooth and claw smothering the light behind fur and sweat and wrath. Baerelt's head is thick with it, a cloying, dizzying stench. His axe is rising, slow as glacial ice. The beast's eyes swallow him, an infinity of blackness and hate.

*My boy… Soon, Juvik…*

She staggers, hit in the side by something strong enough to throw off her balance. She pulls up, her charge faltering and wild, her bowed, bone-plated head ploughing a deep furrow in the earth. Lightning cracks, a storm that was building, now breaking. A ragged silhouette stands outlined. As the flare fades, the ulfwerener is revealed. Half-healed, half-dead, yet he fights. He leaps onto the female's back as she is rising, slashing and biting. Baerelt attacks, swinging in with his axe. He hacks at fur, at bone plate. He cuts and

swipes until his arms burn. A wild swing catches him and he's flying, his weapon spinning away before a battering ram punches the air from his chest and he's gasping on the ground.

Blearily, he rises, stumbling. She's bleeding, dying, ripped open and all her defiance spilling red across the clearing. The ulfwerener is in her jaws, slowly being crushed, his death screams an awful refrain to the storm's thunder. He's torn in two, bone sheared, legs and body separated, and she throws both halves aside like rotten meat. A bleat escapes her ruddy maw. Her fur glistens with fever sweat. She heaves her bulk towards Baerelt, who's on his feet again, the upper half of Ulfvye's broken spear in his hand.

He doesn't speak. He hasn't the breath. He clutches the spear like a thrusting dagger and decides to go for the eye.

She takes another pace, then another, every effort laboured, the blood from her wounds sheeting. Then she jerks, hard, turns and slumps dead. A war axe juts from her back. The runes upon its blade flare in a sudden crack of lightning.

The male is dead too, his neck snapped. As Jotun stands over the female's corpse, he wrenches the axe loose and holds it aloft.

Baerelt knows then. He *sees* but he is still unprepared for the revelation.

'Brave…' says Jotun, staring sadly at the dead ulfwerener, 'so very brave.'

'I'm sorry,' rasps Baerelt, his voice trembling.

'He died in battle, fighting for his king,' says Jotun, turning to face the hunter. 'What better death is there? But I shall mourn him all the same.'

'King…' utters Baerelt.

Jotun does not reply. Instead he looks up into the black bruised sky, and Baerelt realises that not all the thunder is coming from the storm. As he follows the giant's gaze, a shape begins to resolve.

At first he thinks it a giant roc, a great hunting bird of prey. But the bird's wings have the firmness of iron. They are painted slate grey. Sigils like those on the shields of his clan colour the hull and Baerelt realises it's not a bird, it's a boat. One that sails the skies.

The boat touches down in a whirlwind, dirt and forest detritus sent spinning in its powerful, noisy wake. The roar of it fades, settling into a low purr like that of a sleeping predator. A hatch opens and two tall armoured warriors step forth, one in black and festooned with bone fetishes; the other in grey, a broad wolf pelt draped across his shoulders. They are huge,

formidable but they pale next to Jotun.

And kneel before him.

Baerelt cannot understand their words, but he knows fealty when he sees it.

‘You *are* a king…’ he utters.

The warriors rise, the one in black regarding the hunter through a wolf-skull helm on his way to the dead ulfwerener.

The other glances at Baerelt, muttering something to Jotun, who replies with a nod.

‘You fought here, Fenryka?’ asks the warrior. He is unhelmed. His beard and fangs give him a feral appearance, and Baerelt realises that Jotun is perhaps more than just their king.

He nods, finding it difficult to speak in the presence of the gods. For what else could they possibly be?

The warrior gives him an approving look.

‘Perhaps he should return with us,’ he says to Jotun, but the king laughs. They joke. The gods joke.

‘No,’ says Jotun, ‘he must go back. To his clan, to his people. He has a story to tell, don’t you, skjald?’

Baerelt only stares.

Jotun’s eyes narrow. ‘Of a giant, or a storm perhaps? Of a black wolf… A king?’ He grows sombre. ‘I have a story too, of Baerelt the Hunter. A brave man, a loyal man who honoured the memory of the dead and served his king.’ He smiles then, a nod to acknowledge his appreciation.

Baerelt says nothing until the gods have returned to their boat, until it has cast off into the sky, until he is alone and staring up into the storm.

*A story to tell…*

‘Of the Russ,’ he says, ‘of the Lord of Wolves and Winter.’

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# THE SIXTH CULT OF THE DENIED

David Guymer

*OceanofPDF.com*

*No one knew how deep the Great Ocean went. No one had ever tried to gauge how far into the unknown its outer limits might extend. There were those who believed the Ocean to be infinite. Others argued that it did not exist at all outside of metaphor.*

*Neither interpretation satisfied the seeker of knowledge.*

*They were intellectually lazy, and functionally meaningless. The knowable universe, too, was often said to be infinite – but what did that mean? What mysteries might be discovered as one approached its non-existent edge? All questions had their answers in the Great Ocean, if one was prepared to risk all to seek them.*

*He knew that, and had deemed the price of his enlightenment fair.*

*Only a promise, made to his father, had kept him from shedding his body of flesh and voyaging in the Ocean as long as he had.*

*But then, revelation always resides in the last place one looks…*

Hakoris restructured the wards over his temporary sanctum, and descended

the mosaicked steps towards the peristyle.

There had once been a functioning water fountain in the central garden, but bomb damage had clogged it. Work gangs of local labourers, servitors and penal companies of Prosperine Spireguard, exhorted in their good work by a junior iterator, worked to clear away the rubble. The old villa, once the townhouse of a powerful member of 28-18's feudal elite, one of the so-called Resource Barons, was clad in scaffolding. Automata cranes were clamped to the bombed-out corner walls like vultures, flak batteries and communications vanes sprouting from what remained of the emerald roof tiles almost by the hour.

The proximity of so many conflicting auras unsettled Hakoris' humours, and he reached for the first order of Enumerations to rebalance his thoughts.

His practicus, Djet, the most senior and able of his apprentices, waited on him at the bottom of the steps. He stood in a small, self-actuated circle of order, holding a marl clay amphora of Tizcan sweet wine in one hand and the force sword *Rahtep*, in its jewelled scabbard, over the opposite shoulder like a probationer's satchel. He offered the amphora first.

Hakoris waved it away, feeling a queasiness in his gut that was, given his altered physiology, entirely psychological. He almost laughed. He had duelled with aeldari warlocks, fought the native predators of the Great Ocean and bled on the fields of Bezant, and today he was nervous.

With a flutter of power, Djet summoned one of the house servants to his side. The woman took the amphora from him, blinked, unsure what had possessed her to do such a thing, and then ventured off in the direction of the kitchens.

When she was gone, Hakoris did laugh, and honoured his practicus with a bow.

'Wonderful,' he said. 'You dipped your hand into the Great Ocean, and even I barely noticed.'

Djet looked at his feet.

'Thank you, lord.'

He had been born Danjareth, to the plainspeople of 28-9, but had since adopted the more Prosperine pseudonym Djet as his own. He was eight years old and had been apprentice to Hakoris for five. He was also gifted. Many of the children tithed from Magnus the Red's ninth conquest had proven to be so, although nobody in the Legion had been able to explain

why. Traditionally, a probationer attended on his Fellowship's Magisteria on the ninth day of the ninth month of his ninth year to be tested on his knowledge of the *Liber Throa*, but given the vagaries of warp travel, astropathic communication and relativistic time this was seldom exact.

Hakoris put his huge, giant's hand on the boy's shoulder. Djet was too young to flinch under his touch, which Hakoris appreciated more than he might have thought he would.

'I will confer with the Magisteria after the forum,' he said.

'Thank you, lord,' Djet muttered again, and with downcast eyes presented his master's sword.

*Rahtep* had been a gift from the primarch himself, two metres of rarefied Tizcan steel, crystal inlay and psyk-reactive circuitry. The pommel piece was a multifaceted piece of crystal from the Reflecting Caves beneath Tizca. The scabbard was of sumptuous red leather, decorated with lapis lazuli and carnelian with runes picked out in gold leaf and thread. Bearing it was both an honour and a penance – the symbol of office, in his own mind, for a dreamless brotherhood that none now dared speak of. Not even the primarch. And not Hakoris. Mortal muscle was not enough to lift such a blade. Not for a boy of eight.

Once again, Hakoris found himself impressed.

He bowed his head low and took the proffered blade.

Djet circled around to buckle the sword belt around Hakoris' waist.

Two more XV legionaries passed under the peristyle from the vestibule, their sandalled feet crunching on the debris of the fallen ceiling. Both warriors had the golden skin and blue-green eyes of trueborn sons of Prospero, clad in pleated, knee-length *shendyt* with golden buckles, and open tunics that exposed the huge pectoral and abdominal slabs of trans-human muscle. Khaleif, the younger of the two, but the more melancholic by far, gave a salute. It was a brief, minimalist affair that could only have passed between fellow scholars and friends. Nepfithu would have done the same, had he not had his arms full with a bushel of hand-written grimoires. A hundred carefully rolled papyrus scrolls hung from the hem of his shendyt on wires. He looked tired, dark rings around his eyes.

'I could not rest,' said Nepfithu, grinning.

'Studying all night,' said Hakoris, and shook his head. 'It is a symposia, brother. It is not a test.'

Khaleif grunted. ‘There is always a test.’

‘We will make them see the truth,’ said Nepfithu.

‘No,’ said Hakoris. ‘We will show it to them. And then they will know it for themselves.’

Nepfithu grinned.

Khaleif shrugged.

‘What?’ said Hakoris.

He knew these two warriors as well as he knew anyone, which was not very well at all. He had never sought company and since… *since his return*, company had rarely sought to engage with him.

‘I wonder if this is too soon,’ said Khaleif. ‘We have many theories. Little proof.’

‘We have proof,’ said Nepfithu.

‘To persuade the converted,’ said Khaleif, pointedly.

‘I do not seek the validation of my peers,’ said Hakoris, softly. He looked up, as if to announce that he was not speaking to himself. ‘I want only to understand how the Thousand Sons were saved.’

Djet stepped back from him, finished.

‘Why this, my lord?’ he said, and immediately flushed as Nepfithu and Khaleif both stared at him and Hakoris turned around. ‘I mean… why that and nothing else?’

Nepfithu and Khaleif looked abashed.

Hakoris gave genuine consideration to answering.

His humours really were out of balance.

He advanced to the second order of Enumerations.

‘Come,’ he said. ‘I would not want to be late for my own symposia.’

The city of Therebarg was a pseudo-medieval capitolis with a population of about a hundred thousand, the nominal centre of a rudimentary continental empire and the seat of government for the Resource Barons, who had carved it up between them. It was an unplanned sprawl of tight-knit streets, developed over unchanging centuries for the needs of equine traffic and peasant handcarts. Dedicated Compliance officers were hard at work widening a handful of prime arterials to accept STC vehicles, and the new plan that was emerging, based on the Prosperine geometries, was both simple and beautiful. A select few trade halls and villas remained intact,

eight grand structures that, by accident or design, formed a perfect alignment around the central shape of a huge, reflective pyramid. The Great Pyramid of Photep, in Tizca, was its model and, though but a fraction of its size and otherworldly presence, the Pyramid of Theret, as it had begun to be called, would nevertheless be a wonder of the subsector when it was completed.

The Thereans had resisted the XV Legion, but only after their own fashion. Their rulership was feudal, their armies disunited and primitively equipped. They were so ignorant of their place in the universe they did not even have a name for their world.

Most Imperial personnel called it Thera, or simply made do with 28-18.

The damage to the city had actually occurred after the conflict, such as it had been.

Magnus the Red had looked upon it and decided that its people deserved better.

Leaving the convalescent capitolis behind them, Hakoris, Khaleif, Nepfithu and young Djet – running along in their wake – crossed onto the high causeway to the Pyramid of Theret.

Four hundred metres high. Six hundred from corner to corner. The bulk of its construction was limestone, hewn from the planet's own quarries and transported here, but the cladding was Tizcan porphyry and blown glass, each plate hand-engraved by probationers of the XV. Scores of tutelaries, figments of the Great Ocean invisible to those without the aether-sight, flocked the electrum *benbenet* of its capstone, frolicking in the ley lines across which the great pyramid had been set like fish behind a dam. Hakoris' own familiar, Saponet, was amongst them. There was Neiru, Nepfithu's tutelary: exuberant, ambitious, vibrant; all vivid primary hues and unsubtle energies. And Iset, Khaleif's: a fan of rainbow-tinted gold who was cautious in the pyramid's bow waves where the other tutelaries were bold. Most Thousand Sons thought of the tutelaries as interesting, and occasionally useful curiosities. To those few scholars who took an interest, they were fragments of the primordial Creator, manifestations of a legionary's personality reflected from the surface of the Ocean the way light is reflected by physical water. The creatures were devoted to their masters and inherently tame, closer to friends or confidantes than pets.

Hakoris knew better.

And knowledge, as always, made the truth even more wondrous.

Warriors of the First Fellowship *Sekhmet* stood along the causeway at intervals determined by numerological constants and deep arithmetic, each one armed and armoured, as still and as perfect as the shabtis of the Order of the Jackal, encased in crimson ceramite and gold.

Hakoris nodded to them as he strode past.

He knew many of their names, and they knew him, even if he did not know them personally.

‘The work is almost complete,’ said Khaleif, nodding towards the pyramid.

Hakoris did not know how his philosophus could tell, but geometry had always been Khaleif’s second love. After his studies of the Great Ocean, and before the arts of war.

‘Soon we will leave this world behind us,’ he agreed.

Nepfithu grinned. ‘But it will be remembered.’

Hakoris watched the tutelaries at play, and in spite of his unease, their gaiety made him smile.

‘It looks as though a great many of the Thousand Sons have come to debate our work.’

Khaleif squinted, the dazzling coronae of energies playing about the apex of the pyramid proving too much for genhanced vision and for aether-sight. ‘Sobek. Aaetpio. Paeoc. Utipa. Sioda.’

‘By Terra’s beacon,’ said Nepfithu. ‘Their masters are here?’

‘It will be a rare forum,’ said Hakoris.

Nepfithu shook his head and chuckled at Hakoris’ understatement.

Khaleif frowned.

‘Who?’ said Djet, behind them. ‘Who has come?’

‘You will see, boy,’ said Nepfithu.

Entrance to the Pyramid of Theret was by a golden pylon wide enough for an Atept-se 17 Night Rake interceptor to taxi through. A single legionary waited for them beneath the elaborate cartouche on the horizontal. Like them he was unarmoured, clad in a long, hooded robe that was so fine as to be almost transparent. A force sword lay belted at his hip. He carried a crook-like reliquary staff. The warrior raised a hand, as if in greeting and one tutelary from the flock descended like a hawk recalled to its glove. It faded into the creases of its master’s robes as soon as it landed, and even before it had fully vanished Hakoris had quite forgotten that it was there.

‘You are late,’ the robed warrior said. ‘I feared that some last minute distraction had claimed you.’

Nepfithu snorted. The robed legionary bowed to him, and to Khaleif. They returned the bow, deeper.

‘I would not miss this forum for any other prize,’ said Hakoris.

‘No,’ the warrior sighed. ‘I do not believe that you would.’

The legionary drew back his hood.

His bald head was heavily tattooed with Prosperine hieroglyphs of obscure reference and a number of geometrical motifs. The deep lines of great age carved his face, and he wore a short beard that was equal parts silver-grey and black. His eyes were hard, but Hakoris felt they belied a hidden sadness. Like Hakoris, the magister preferred his solitude, to hold himself and his humours apart from his brothers. And so Hakoris had never pried.

‘Thank you for arranging this symposium,’ he said, bowing his head. ‘It will not be forgotten, Magister Amon.’

*The Great Ocean was almost impossible to study directly. In the same way that a quantum particle could not be explained until it was assayed, the Ocean did not exist until it was observed, and it was defined by its observer. He sought knowledge, and so knowledge was what it gave him. Knowledge made corporeal. A maze of it. A labyrinth.*

*A translation cypher for the infamous Voynich Codex.*

*An entire missing row of periods for the table of elements.*

*Thirty-five unknown plays by the Shakspire.*

*The secrets of the Aeldari Fall.*

*The knowledge of the Old Ones, lost to the War in Heaven.*

*The nature of reality itself.*

*All he had to do was dive into that trove and the knowledge would be his. He could have explored that cavern of wonders forever, but he forced his spirit to look beyond it. There was one treasure that he sought to the exclusion of all others.*

*Days, weeks, years, endless quanta of infinity, he spent in increasing frustration, discarding lore that would have altered the path of galaxies had it but been known. But the one jewel of wisdom he sought was not there.*

*The beacon set by his acolytes in the universe of the physical grew faint already, but even as he heeded it he gathered his body of light to go deeper*

*still…*

The pyramid's interior was laid out in accordance with ancient principles, the numerical series and golden means of the *Liber Abaci*. A Grand Gallery descended steeply from the entrance pylon to the centre of the pyramid's geometries. From this Chamber of Possibilities, seven subordinate passages diverged into a glittering complex of libraries, contemplation chambers and scriptoria. The eighth passage was a vertical shaft, leading to a small chamber sited directly beneath the benbenet capstone. An observatory into the realm aetheric, oriented to the psychic flows and empyreal currents of 28-18 the way an optical telescope was to the magnetic field lines and spectral pollution of its parent world.

The XV did not labour over liberated peoples with the same love or zeal as Lorgar's XVII, but nor would they leave a legacy of cratered and embittered worlds in their wake.

The Pyramid of Theret would be a citadel of enlightenment, and when Magnus the Red did finally deem it right for the Legion to move on to conquests new, it would be to leave behind a gleaming citadel of Compliance, the foundations of its prosperity driven deep by the Thousand Sons.

The Chamber of Possibilities had been laid down as an example of paradigm geometries. Shift one's perspective, alter one's expectation, and the circular parquetry of its floor seamlessly became a pattern of interlocking triangles, pentagrams and so on towards a shape of infinite sides. Look again and it was an enneagram, a nine-pointed star, a trinity of trinities, a model of the human psyche through nine archetype personalities. The ceiling was an elaborate cartouche: Imperial Ankh, Nor'Hion, Ament'Ret, Ouroboros, all enclosed within the Eye of Magnus. The triumph of knowledge over the infinite. Seating was arranged in tiers. There was ample space for two hundred learned warriors and yet, with the exception of a handful of robed legionaries in the mezzanine and upper tiers, the chamber was almost empty.

Hakoris frowned.

Where were the scholars, the remembrancers, the lorekeepers of the Red Orders? Where was the Legion's army of lay scholars, minute-takers and scribes?

Nepfithu looked around at the empty seating. ‘Is this it?’

One of the seated warriors rose. ‘You have not been given leave to speak.’

‘This is a free symposium, brother,’ said Hakoris, folding his arms over his chest and raising his voice to reach the speaker.

‘Is that what you think this is?’

Walking so softly that Hakoris was unaware of him until he felt the hand on his shoulder, Amon gestured towards the perfectly spherical ‘eye’ at the centre of the parquetry’s convergent geometries. The touch on his back was enough to start him towards it. Amon, meanwhile, walked towards a seat in the front row. He moved like a warrior. But when he sat it was as an old man.

‘What is this?’ Hakoris asked him from the centre of the nine-pointed star.

Amon did not answer.

‘Now we can begin.’ The warrior who had spoken earlier to chastise Nepfithu drew back his hood. ‘Azhek Ahriman. Magister Templi of the Corvidae.’

A second warrior rose. ‘Phosis T’kar,’ he growled. ‘Magister Templi of the Raptora.’

One by one, the seated legionaries rose to announce themselves.

‘Hathor Maat. Magister Templi of the Pavoni.’

‘Baleq Uthizzar. Magister Templi of the Athanaeans.’

‘Kalophis. Magister Templi of the Pyrae.’

Amon spoke without standing. ‘You know who I am.’ He bowed his head. ‘Brother.’

Hakoris’ lips threatened a grimace.

He dipped his head in the proper attitude of respect for the *Rehati*, the cadre of senior officers appointed by Magnus himself.

This was hardly the grand symposium that Amon had led him to expect, and yet… here he stood before the Magisters of the five Great Cults and the equerry of Magnus the Red. Someone took his investigations into the true nature of the Great Ocean seriously, even if it did not look as though they would be getting the hearing he had wished for just yet.

‘And I am Aqhet Hakoris,’ he said, rising from his bow. ‘Magister Templi of the Aquilae.’

Kalophis snorted.

T’kar chuckled. ‘Now *that*, brother, is why you are here.’

‘I overstep, I know,’ Hakoris conceded. ‘Once I have spoken, you will know why.’

‘You would have us recognise a sixth Cult,’ said Ahriman.

‘I would.’

‘The architects of Tizca will need to find room for a sixth pyramid,’ said Maat.

The Rehati chuckled at that. With the exception of Amon. He remained diffidently interested, as though he watched rather than listened.

Hakoris stiffened. ‘I have read the Great Library’s copy of the *Diologo*, the *Commentariolus*, and *A Speciei Originem*. Have you, brothers? Had you, then you would know that this would hardly be the first time that a new discovery has upset an established order.’

Amon’s eyebrow lifted.

Ahriman frowned, but he was no longer laughing.

‘And you believe that you have made this discovery. Aqhet Hakoris. Captain of the Ninth Fellowship’s Amenta-Ninety-Nine Circle. You claim this undertaking that had eluded our ancient Prosperine forebears and evaded the *Pesedjet* of Magnus the Red.’

‘And when did we first conceive the primarch to be all-knowing and all-seeing?’ Hakoris answered sharply. ‘The moment we do, do we not render ourselves redundant? Why not then resign ourselves to our basic purpose as instruments of war?’ He waved his hand dismissively over the tiers of empty seats that overlooked him. ‘And leave higher notions of philosophy, science and art to the arch-magus and the ipssisumus Himself.’ He looked up into silence. ‘Well?’

‘*They have no answer for you, Captain Hakoris.*’

There was a crack, like the thunder of Zaeus of Grekan legend, as a staff of onyx and ormolu struck the ground, and like the birth flare of the universe Magnus the Red now stood where Magnus the Red had not been before. Hakoris looked helplessly upon his gene-father. Colours had never before been as vibrant. The physical plane had never been more *manifest*. The primarch was a supernova encased in golden ceramite, an elaborate harness of curling horns, sculpted muscles and esoteric calligraphy designed to contain the physicality of a being that rejected all such constraints. His face was a collage of every thought and emotion ever experienced by man. His hair was a wild shock of crimson, bound by a spectrum of precious metals

that was more a rainbow than it was a crown. Every speck of light that reflected from his armour was a star. Plates of turquoise leather were woven into his war-plate to form pteruges and a kilt that hung to his knees, and *Ahn-Nunurta*, the sickle-bladed force sword of the Prosperine god of war, lay in a belt of silksteel at his waist.

Khaleif and Nepfithu were already on bended knee.

Djet was weeping.

The boy would have been aware of Magnus' presence in the system; to any open mind it would have been as palpable as light or gravity. But this was the first time he had *witnessed* the glory of a primarch and Hakoris had first-hand experience of how powerful an experience that could be.

Hakoris simply bowed his head, averting tear-filled eyes as Magnus the Red set his staff on the parquetry geometry and drew a complicated symbol across the ground.

'I invoke the Symbol of Thutmose,' said Magnus, twisting his staff clockwise and then withdrawing it from the invisible sigil like a key from a lock.

The drawn rune flashed briefly, and Hakoris moaned as the world around him dulled. The tides of the Great Ocean withdrew, and he felt a negative pressure on his mind as it pressed against the confines of his skull. The braziers mounted on the wall burned sulkily. Textures became flat, patterns meaningless, faces empty. Hakoris looked up at the Magisters Templi, but they had become unreadable to him, as if the entire chamber had faded apart from him. His body felt numb.

Hakoris had once, briefly, shared a warzone with an Excruciatus cadre of the Emperor's Silent Sisterhood. Their existence, just ten kilometres away, had been like being stabbed repeatedly in the heart and the eyes. Being caught under the Symbol of Thutmose was like being trapped under a thick blanket or a heavy net: uncomfortable, deeply unnerving, but bearable.

Of all the potent psykers gathered in the Chamber of Possibilities, only Magnus himself continued to sputter with aetheric potency.

'Of that which is spoken within these walls there will be no record, except for that which is written here.' The primarch's hand dropped to the colossal tome of arcane lore, the *Book of Magnus*, that hung from his belt by a chain beside his sword. 'And here.' He tapped a long, tapering nail on his crimson brow. 'I command every soul herein to secrecy, unless my final judgement

be to recant that instruction.’

‘I… do not understand, lord,’ said Hakoris, struggling to recall how to speak without his connection to the many voices of the Great Ocean. ‘I am here to share my discoveries of the Ocean’s true nature with the Legion.’

Sweeping out a long cloak of crimson feathers, Magnus took a seat beside his equerry.

Amon was a blank face and a hollow stare under the Symbol of Thutmose.

‘You were right, my son,’ said Magnus. ‘I am not all-knowing, and nor am I all-seeing. But there is much that I do see, and much more that I know. You are not here to share your discoveries. You are here to account for them.’

*Deeper into the Great Ocean than he had ever gone in the company of his father, a new kind of predator lurked. They looked like nothing at all until he drew close, formless threats until he arrived at the conscious decision to enter their waters. They circled like the sharks of Terra’s prehistoric seas, and more, a protean blending of primeval terrors from the deepest reaches of Old Earth and a hostile cosmos with an inborn antipathy to intelligent life. The seeker of knowledge had studied broadly and travelled widely in coming this far, and few minds were as open to the true nature of the universe as his: he could conceive of horrors that few others would dare apprehend, and the weird plasticity of the Ocean readily obliged the Domains of Life conjured by his imaginings.*

*Teeth. Frills. Suckers. Barbs.*

*Spots. Stripes. Exotic chromatophores. Mimetic displays.*

*There were saurid giants. Club-wielding primates with murderous grins. Carnivorous swarms of insects, piranhas, and psychneuein.*

*Without the power of his father to repel them, they did not hesitate long before making their attack. The seeker did not command the mastery of his father, but he was not without some might of his own.*

*Anger rose in his thoughts, and he shaped it into a sword of crimson fire that he swept through a manifestation of hunger with the head and body of a shark and the limbs of a wolf. A squid-like malfeasance spread to envelop him with its tendrils. It was of an order beneath him, and with a thought he made it literally so, reworking their relative dimensions until it was insignificant enough for him to crush in one hand. Like air towards a*

*vacuum the denizens of the Great Ocean rushed at him. Too many to destroy. He roared his frustration into the Ocean, and destruction rolled from him in waves.*

*Where was the answer that he sought?*

*He felt the tug on his astral cord as his acolytes, sensing his peril, sought to recall him. His body of light had never spent so long abroad of its physical host, ventured so far or fought so hard.*

*But to retreat now would be to surrender the knowledge he sought forever. This was a fact that he understood without any grounding in logic or facts. Such was the nature of the Great Ocean. It answered to symbolism, ritual and sacrifice. It rewarded peril.*

*Brandishing his sword of anger, he armoured himself in hard plates of determination.*

*He would sooner lose everything than fail here.*

‘Account for them?’ said Hakoris, struggling to marshal his dismay with the dampening power of the Symbol of Thutmose throbbing over his Enumerations, and faring poorly. He pinched his temples, shook his head to clear it. ‘When have the boundaries of what can be learned ever been proscribed? The human mind did not evolve to be shackled. No. Rather, it seeks to throw off ignorance whenever it finds it. And if, when it does, it discovers something true then humanity, the universe as a whole, is richer for its perseverance. We lend our arms to the Great Crusade, lord, but *this…*’ He tapped his throbbing temple, realised he had been pacing his small triangle of parquetry and stopped. He gave a swift bow to reaffirm his deference. ‘This is the true battle that needs to be waged. If mankind is to be the master of all his faculties, to never again slide into the darkness of ignorance and strife.’

Magnus sat back, his hands coming together into an anjali mudra. It was a brief note, a single, silent character of applause, before he steepled his fingers and set them across his lips. The Magisters Templi had become phantoms in the high seating. Even Amon had become a dim shade beside the primarch’s coronal grandeur.

Stare too long into the light and even the eye of a Thousand Sons legionary could be blinded.

Magnus the Red was such a light.

The primarch thought well before speaking.

‘The appearance of boundaries has always had a role to play in progress. It is a reassurance to those who might otherwise feel threatened by advancement and change and seek to undermine it. How easily might a wounded and vengeful human race have laid Mars and all its lore to waste if not for the Crimson Accords and the destruction of the silica animus? The Emperor, too, has restricted many of the technologies that once threatened to bring humanity low.’ His expression darkened and the chamber, albeit briefly, appeared to do the same. ‘Horus and the Lion together petitioned Him to outlaw many of the psychic technologies that I shared with my brothers’ Legions.’ His expression again became sanguine, and Hakoris almost doubted whether he had seen the change at all. ‘It is possible to hold a pure view on the value of knowledge, while also acknowledging where humanity in its infinite complexity remains unready for it.’ He shrugged slightly. ‘How else are we, in this fragile, fumbling age, to account for the collapse of our species from its zenith? An Age of Technology as we, even here, can but dimly envisage.’

‘But we are the Thousand Sons,’ said Hakoris. ‘To succumb to fear and ignorance, that is to fall into the trap laid for us by others. To perceive ourselves as they do.’

Magnus smiled.

Hakoris’ face could do nothing but mirror it.

Was it even possible, he wondered, for a Legiones Astartes warrior to defy the temperament of his own primarch?

An interesting area of enquiry, had he not obsessions enough of his own.

‘It is not their fault,’ said Magnus, after a moment. ‘They will come to our way of thinking in time. They derive from the same maker as do we, and strive for the same being’s goals.’

‘With respect, lord, you are not Mortarion. You are not Horus, or El’Jonson. You are Magnus the Red, Crimson King of Prospero, patron of scholars and seeker of knowledge. I do not believe you would seek to prevent my explorations of the Great Ocean.’

‘I would. If I decide that I must.’

‘But why?’ The question burst from his breast. ‘No question is more profound, or promises to answer so much.’

Again, Magnus appeared to think deeply before answering. Something

unnerving passed the myriad flux of his facial expressions.

‘I am here to judge *your* studies and its dangers, Aqhet. Do not think to question me.’

Hakoris’ gaze fell away, unable to bear his primarch’s anger.

‘No, lord.’

‘Look at me.’

Hakoris forced his face to turn upwards.

Magnus’ single golden eye drank him in: it was impossible to look into that liquid orb and speak anything but truth.

‘What have you found, Aqhet, to conclude that the Aquilae is more than just a coterie of common interest, that what it represents is a sixth aspect of power overlooked until now by all before you?’

‘The Raptora, the Corvidae, the Athanaeans, the Pyrae, the Pavoni – they are collectives of like minds and similar powers, each reflections of the Great Ocean. The Aquilae has ventured further from the comfort of the shallows, and I contend that there is a power fundamentally of its own nature to be found in the deeper places of the empyreal sea.’

‘Go on,’ said Magnus.

‘It is not another aspect of power such as the five Cults represent. I believe it to be the basis of all power.’

‘So,’ said Magnus, his voice drawing itself out. ‘It is superior.’

Hakoris shook his head. ‘No, lord. I did not mean–’

‘The moon may illuminate the night, but take away the sun and it loses its power.’

‘Are you familiar with the Terran parable of the blind men and the elephant?’

Magnus smiled.

‘I would hear you tell it anyway.’

Hakoris frowned, looking inward for a moment to set himself, and then nodded. ‘A group of blind men learn of a creature, an elephant, in their village, which none of the men have encountered before. Although the men cannot see they decide they must visit this fantastical creature, and that by touch alone they might explore it. The elephant was, supposedly, a vast creature, and each man could feel but a single part of the whole. One man felt its long proboscis and described the elephant as being a long and muscular serpent. Another groped a leg and declared it to be akin to a tree.

A third man pushed against its hide and argued that, no, it was clearly as tall and strong as the wall of a house. Other men explored its tail, its ear, and its tusk, and none could agree on the single nature of the elephant, or realise that, but for the want of another way of seeing, all of their interpretations were true.'

'Variants of the tale can be found throughout the old cultures of the Asiatic plate,' said Magnus. 'In many of them, it is interpreted as a cautionary tale against the perils of dogma, a parable of the subjectivity of knowledge. In others, however, it evolved instead to become a chastisement of the "blind" for their failure to recognise the great work of a visionary.' He smiled at Hakoris, but it was without warmth or reassurance. The eye held him like a hand against a wall.

Arguing philosophy with Magnus the Red was like wrestling with fire.

'Are you the visionary or the fool, Aqhet?'

'I–'

'No, please continue,' he said. 'You have wielded your metaphor well, now show us your argument's point.'

Hakoris' torso half-turned, his eyes not quite able to break the primarch's hold, and gestured towards Nepfithu. The warrior had become abstract under the Symbol of Thutmose, clearer to him than the Rehati but still faintly drawn. He remained bowed and on bent knee, entirely unmoving, the bushel of grimoires he had been carrying set reverently upon the ground before him

'We have been diligent in recording all that we have–'

'It will be examined,' said Magnus, with a dismissive flick of long, clawlike nails. 'I want to know what you know. But more. I want to know what you believe you know.'

Hakoris licked his lips: transhuman physiology was superbly optimised for fluid retention, and yet his lips were dry.

'I have explored the Great Ocean in astral form,' he said.

'All who have pushed as far as the second Enumeration have seen the Ocean,' Magnus said, his voice taking on more of a growl with every word he uttered. 'All who do know better than to fly too far, or to gaze too deeply. The Emperor Himself drew this promise from me in the Halls of Leng.'

'And why?'

Hakoris felt the warning in the subtle retreat of the primarch's emotions from his. '*Why?*'

'We all have some awareness of that which dwells in the deep Ocean.'

'Predatory emotions,' said Magnus. 'Strange manifestations. Perilous reflections. Are they alive? Perhaps they are, though it would stretch most definitions of *life*. Are they self-aware? I am not sure.' He bared his teeth. 'Yes, my son. I can acknowledge ignorance, even in myself. What is learning, but the realisation and rejection of one's prior limits? What is wisdom but the room to doubt? These… let us call them *creatures*, lest we allow for the more colourful etymology of past generations to colour our perceptions.' He chuckled darkly. 'But as to the question of intelligence. They appear to our astral selves as sharks and wolves and any blending of ten thousand predacious bioforms encountered by the collective human psyche over the millennia of its evolution and expansion. Tell me why that is, Aqhet?'

'Because the warp reflects what it is shown.'

Magnus nodded, teeth still showing. 'It is fearful and dangerous, because that is what we are. How can a reflection of our own thoughts and powers claim self-awareness, or even true intelligence? You do not hold your tutelary, Saponet, as an independent partner, and nor is there anything to be found in the deeper Ocean but the ancient echoes of ancestral foibles.'

'A surface can be reflective on both sides, lord.'

Magnus paused.

It was a small thing, but Hakoris noticed it, a subtle redrawing of psychic tensions, as obvious, even under the aegis of the Symbol of Thutmose, as a blush across a man's face or the facial tic that presaged violence.

'They are not like us,' Hakoris continued. 'But those entities who dwell in the very deepest reaches of the Ocean are both intelligent and aware. Though they are aware of us I believe they find us as strange and indecipherable as I do them. They are curious of me, lord, of us, and if they are capable of curiosity then does that not make them independently intelligent? Can they not, indeed, be reasoned with? Imagine what we could learn of the Great Ocean from beings who are fundamentally as one with its powers. And *that*,' he said, taking a deep breath, 'is the Aquilae.'

Magnus leant slowly forwards. His eye was glowing.

'Have you conversed with one of these intelligences, Aqhet Hakoris?'

Hakoris broke eye contact with an effort.

It was impossible to look into that eye and speak anything but truth.

‘No.’

For a long time, Magnus said nothing.

His aura faded into contemplation, diminishing from that of a supreme being to an aspect more comparable to that of a Grekan titan, the son of the primordial deities of Earth and Heaven. His presence descended from the astral, becoming merely a superhuman giant of red skin and golden armour. The retreat of his halo permitted Hakoris a glimpse of his jurors, the Magisters Templi in the higher benches, but they remained patiently observant, each confined to their own minds. In light of proceedings Hakoris was uncertain why Magnus had convened them. They would ultimately obey the primarch’s judgement and his was the only mind of consequence.

Not the Emperor’s.

Not Horus’.

Only Magnus ruled the XV Legion.

‘I thought that you of all people would approve,’ said Hakoris, softly. ‘You were the one who saved the Thousand Sons. Surely you could see the value of this work.’

‘I could ask why this subject was so dear to you, but I know why.’

The primarch sighed.

Hakoris could feel the argument escaping him, and he did not know why. His ignorance irritated him more than his failure of persuasion. Doubt and uncertainty troubled him like a rash.

Why was Magnus so predisposed against his work?

An uncomfortable theory began to formulate in his mind.

*The primarch knows*.

With Magnus occupied in contemplation, Hakoris found himself able to turn his head.

Khaleif, Nepfithu and Djet wore vaguely outlined expressions of bewilderment and horror. He caught Nepfithu’s eye. A resolve passed between them, one conveyed through understanding and innuendo for no true communion could occur through the Symbol of Thutmose or evade Magnus’ notice, and the legionary’s outline appeared to firm as it did so.

It was becoming obvious that Magnus the Red knew something he was not prepared to admit. Something that would make him question Hakoris’

enquiries, or fear their purpose.

But Hakoris knew things too.

If he could not convince the primarch of his verity then he would need to *show* him.

‘My lord,’ said Hakoris, simultaneously turning back to the primarch and averting his gaze. ‘I have been caught unprepared, and am less coherent than I would wish to be. If the outcome of this symposium is to determine the fate of the Aquilae then please, permit me a short recess to gather my thoughts before you come to your judgement.’

Magnus frowned, nodded once.

‘Granted.’

*Beyond the shoals of carnivorous thought and predatory dreams, the seeker of knowledge found a thing he had not expected – calm. An endless expanse of flat, colourless aether extended out from him in all directions towards eternity’s end. He had braved the hunger and tumult of the Ocean, rejected its false promises, and he had found… nothing. The sputtering fires of determination became the ash of dejection. His body of light flickered, like a candle glimpsed from across light years of fog as he cried out in despair.*

*And the Ocean rippled.*

‘You lied,’ said Khaleif, as soon as they were alone.

‘Yes,’ said Hakoris.

‘You lied to *Magnus the Red*.’

‘I know.’

‘Why would you not tell him that we had conversed with the Dweller in the Abyss? It proves our every argument.’

‘I… I don’t know. When the moment came I felt that the truth was not what he wanted to hear.’

‘By all that’s written. We are Thousand Sons!’

Hakoris raised his hand, and Khaleif fell quiet.

It was not a gesture of authority, but of absolute mental and physical exhaustion. He had arisen from his meditations expecting the vigour and challenge of debate, yes, the exorcism of counterargument and, through it, the validation of understanding. He had been sure of it, so certain that he had planned for no other outcome. He had prepared his arguments, but not

to these questions, posed with the aggression that they had been, and not from *this* inquisitor. All he wanted now was to retreat to his sanctum and meditate in solitude on how he had gone so far astray.

He slumped into a chair.

There was only one chair in the contemplation chamber and no one challenged his right to it. Nepfithu leant against a wall. Djet made do with the floor, finding space and comfort on bare stone as only the very young are capable of. Khaleif remained standing. In what little space there was available to him, he paced.

The chamber was small and sparsely furnished, lit by the single candle that Hakoris brought with them, set now on the small wooden table. Every aspect of its architecture was overt in the intention to shun stimuli and promote reflection.

Walls of undressed sandstone wobbled, unreal in the candlelight.

Hakoris leant forwards until his elbows rested on the table, head in his hands. The outer ambit of the Symbol of Thutmose veiled the pyramid's outer chambers only thinly, but it remained a pounding ache in his brain. He breathed out.

'Magnus had already decided against us. I do not know why. I do not know why and it… and my ignorance disturbs me. No argument can be won without full possession of the facts.'

'Then why?' said Nepfithu. His collection of books and scrolls were now spread across the table. Hakoris tried to read one, but found its hieroglyphs blurred. He massaged his eyes as Nepfithu went on. 'Why undergo this sham of a forum at all?'

'For appearances' sake,' said Hakoris.

Khaleif grunted. 'Not everyone is as dumb to the humours of their brothers as you are. Believe me, if you sense this from the primarch then Amon and the Magisters Templi will have noted it as well.'

'Then why?' Nepfithu repeated.

'He hopes to be persuaded,' said Khaleif.

'Then we will persuade him, brothers,' said Hakoris. 'And we will not do it with words.'

Khaleif stopped pacing.

Hakoris' expression communicated his intent and before such a look a mortal human might have recoiled, but a Space Marine was psychologically

constructed to know no doubt.

‘We have never gone that deep before,’ said Khaleif.

‘Because we decided not to,’ said Nepfithu.

‘Out of precaution,’ Khaleif agreed. ‘We have only observed from afar. Allowed the Dweller to come to us. We have never called.’

‘It can be done,’ said Hakoris.

With unfocused eyes he gazed through the candle flicker to the uncertain stone beyond. There had been a time, not so long ago to have been dimmed by mythology, when he had been consigned to a brotherhood that dreamed only of the deepest waters. A different warrior. A foreign time. To reflect upon it now was to attempt to recall having once been a proto-hominid ape, a cynodont scurrying under the notice of god-reptiles, or a flatworm swimming in a primeval ocean. And yet, in spite of the depth and grandiose scope of the Emperor’s reworking of his genetic makeup, a part of him had once been these things. He could not *remember* in the explicit, declarative sense, but he could *feel* it.

He did not understand it, but he was close to something of grave consequence to his Legion. So very close.

‘I can call it to me,’ he said.

‘You think you can persuade Magnus by openly defying him?’ said Khaleif.

‘He will be angered, but his own senses will confirm to him that we are right.’

‘No,’ said Khaleif, backing away and making a cutting *out* gesture with his hands. ‘I will have no part in this. This has become your obsession, brother, and I have let it beguile me for too long.’

‘It is not his alone,’ said Nepfithu.

Khaleif folded his arms over his huge chest. The air between the two legionaries flickered with unguarded tension.

‘I will not betray your confidences,’ he said, after a moment had elapsed. ‘But nor will I participate in this dangerous ritual. Or lie to the primarch if asked to speak of it.’ He glared accusingly at Hakoris. ‘He will learn of it eventually. He is Magnus the Red. And when he does he will find in this conspiracy of yours every proof that his suspicions were justified.’

Nepfithu began to protest, but Hakoris raised a hand for peace.

‘Once we are recalled to session there will be no more secrets. I do not lie

to the primarch, Khaleif. I choose my moment of revelation.’

The legionary sighed. ‘How do you even intend to work this? The Symbol of Thutmose will negate any effort of summoning you make.’

‘It will have to be broken.’

Despite his melancholia, Khaleif laughed. ‘Undo a mark of power written by Magnus the Red. Of course. Why did I not consider that?’

‘He is not omnipotent, brother.’

Something in the atmosphere changed.

Just uttering those words aloud felt like a Rubicon being crossed.

It was unsettling: how a simple, unvarnished *fact* could become poisonous.

‘His concentration will be elsewhere.’ He placed his hand flat on his chest, and then turned, his chair creaking, to indicate Djet.

The boy looked up with wide, dark eyes.

‘Me?’ said Djet.

He did not sound afraid. He sounded excited.

*Was I ever that fearless?*

Hakoris smiled inwardly. The practicus would grade philosophus before his fiftieth year, he was sure of it.

‘You would pit a boy against the primarch?’ said Khaleif.

‘A gifted boy,’ Hakoris corrected. ‘And no, I would not. I ask him only to ease the Symbol enough for me to perform the casting without his noticing.’

‘Is that all?’ said Khaleif.

‘I can do it,’ Djet said, excitedly. ‘And then what?’

Nepfithu grinned.

He looked conspiratorially around the candlelit circle of faces.

‘Then, young practicus, we summon a daemon.’

*‘I would have my answer,’ he cried, in a voice manifested by golden will and conveyed by the medium of thought.*

*The Ocean responded like water in a container when that container had been disturbed.*

*‘How far must I search? What more must I do?’*

*Ripples became eddies, eddies became currents, and currents, before one could understand it or convince oneself otherwise, became directed motions.*

*‘What more must I give?’*

*The question echoed back to him from the stirring Ocean. The seeker was learned enough to recognise the challenge for what it was, unwise enough to accept it as given.*

*'Anything!' he replied. 'I would give anything for this knowledge!'*

*Thunder rolled across the Ocean.*

***'Granted,'** it said.*

*Pain welled up from the position of his right eye, and he screamed, drawing his hand to his face, but immediately after the pain came knowledge. The slow burn of understanding. He gasped in wonder, and the Ocean responded, although not as the usual, passive mirror of his joy. He did not understand it, but past, present and future were all one place in the Great Ocean. Even in the throes of enlightenment, on some level he knew – it was a question that would plague him forevermore.*

Amon arrived as the antique water clocks in the contemplation chamber sang the hour to escort the Aquilae back to the Chamber of Possibilities. The old warrior's expression was featureless throughout the short walk. Nothing in its entrenched features or contemplative lines sought to convey his thoughts or seek his erstwhile comrade's forgiveness for this ambush. Hakoris had considered the Magister of the Ninth to be one of his few friends. He reminded himself sourly that Magistus Amon had bound his star to that of Magnus the Red a long time ago.

He crossed to his place in the enneagram.

Amon retook his seat.

The Magisters Templi looked exactly as they had when Hakoris had left them. Had they not announced themselves on his earlier arrival, then he might have assumed them to be mannequins in crimson-and-gold ceramite.

Khaleif, Nepfithu and Djet hung back as Hakoris took his place before Magnus the Red. He bowed and buried all thought of them, pushing his thoughts into the sixth Enumeration, where even a Domnius Liminus of the Athanaeans would struggle to touch them.

Magnus stirred, light shooting from the edges and planes of his armour like stellar glares as he leant forwards in his seat.

'You have had your recess, Aqhet,' he said. Where before his tone had been accusatory, now it sought conciliation. Hakoris felt his convictions wane under the warmth of his father's words. 'I owed you that. You are

right to feel as though you have been ambushed. I desired an honest appraisal of you, rather than a prepared one, but…' He lowered his regal head, the light from numerous braziers scattering from the gold and jewelled encrustations of his crown. 'I apologise nonetheless. We all strive for the means to better the human race. It is the reason we exist, Aqhet. And yes, there is a reason. He conveyed it to me before my physical body had even been formed, before my mind was torn from His presence. The Legiones Astartes will win His war, but only we can secure His peace. Only through the Thousand Sons can mankind realise His dreamed-of utopia.' He sat back. Lights winked across him, becoming muted, the chamber's atmosphere itself becoming sombre in some sympathetic act of psychic resonance. 'But how easily does duty become obsession? A spirit of enquiry can become corrupted by ambition. A desire to succeed, however well intentioned at its outset, can override rationality, even probity.'

For too long, Hakoris was speechless.

The primarch did not simply doubt his work. He attacked his honour.

Was there a worse injury that could be done upon a brother of the Thousand Sons than to assault his intellectual integrity? Hakoris pondered it only because he could not think of a single instance of it ever being done before.

He looked up to the Magisters Templi, but to a man they seemed unmoved by this affront.

'It is not my intention to accuse you of falsity,' said Magnus. 'But I know how desperate you have always been for these answers. And you have already lied to me once.'

Hakoris gawped.

'You have conversed with the entities of the Great Ocean.'

'My lord–'

'Do not insult me with further denial.'

The primarch raised a finger and pointed at Djet.

The boy promptly vanished.

Hakoris stumbled out of the enneagram, stunned.

'It is remarkable what you endured.' Magnus rose from his seat. His voice was a vibration, infiltrating every particle of every barrier, resonating with every spark of psyche. He walked towards Hakoris. And the Rehati did nothing. They watched like painted backdrops in a Prosperine tragedy. 'I

esteem you for it. And I indulged your studies because of it, believing it important for your mind to heal, imagining, perhaps, that you would not be able to discover that which I already had.'

Hakoris pushed his mind into a higher Enumeration, the eighth, the most warlike of the mental postures, walling off his mind entirely from doubt.

But a primarch roused to anger took a mind far beyond doubt.

'What have you done with my practicus?'

'You were a fool to involve him.'

'Nepfithu, Khaleif.' The two legionaries were still kneeling. 'Get out of here.'

'They will not heed you now.'

Hakoris looked again to the Magisters Templi, realisation landing like a bolt from extreme range. 'This is no trial,' he whispered. 'Ahriman, at least, would speak before allowing you to overstep this far.' He turned to glare at Magnus.

The primarch laughed, and in a glitter of the aetheric he swept at Hakoris.

To see the primarch at repose was a singularly terrible thing. It was to expose one's self-image and ambition to their true status within the cosmic order. It was to taste true power in the body of another. To see him unleashed was terror of an altogether different order. Hakoris suddenly felt pity for those that the Crimson King of Prospero had bestirred himself to 'save'.

The legionary grasped for the Ninth and final order of Enumerations, but the primarch was too fast, almost simultaneously not there and *there*.

Magnus' hand closed around Hakoris' throat, and lifted him from the ground the way a man might lift a thing he wished to look beneath. Hakoris was unarmoured, but power armour would have made no difference. Every mental defence he had constructed about himself crumbled before the primarch's presence.

'You know your Terran parables,' said Magnus. 'And that is good. You have been warned, *Icarus*, fly too near to the sun and your wings will be burned.'

Hakoris struggled against the primarch's power, but Magnus' supremacy was total.

His eyes rolled in their sockets.

The Chamber of Possibilities was no longer there. An ocean of

transdimensional flame had displaced it, a Catheric realm of perpetual torments, twisted ambitions and the laughter of cruel gods.

He made a choking sound.

His pupils widened, as though every light in the cosmos had failed him.

‘I lied to the Emperor,’ said Magnus. ‘I lied to my Legion. But only once. To save us all. Here is your truth, Aqhet, your panacea of enlightenment.’ Creatures formed entirely of eyes, teeth and scales, swam from the maelstrom of the inchoate, drawn by the psychic beacon that was Magnus the Red. ‘Here, in my desperation, is where I sought the power to save my Thousand Sons. And where I found it. Ahriman does not know this. Amon does not. Ask yourself why I have decided that this must be so.’

‘I spoke to a warp alien,’ Hakoris choked, brought to tears by his admission. ‘It called itself… Choronzon.’

Magnus squeezed Hakoris’ throat tight. It was only by a miracle, or by forbearance, that he did not snap the legionary’s neck.

‘Then for the good of the Legion you will do as I once did,’ said Magnus. ‘You will lie.’

A sudden jolt pushed Hakoris from his mind and he blinked, clearing the glare of ivory decals and gold plating from his eyes and seeing the chamber for what felt to him like the first time. The Magisters Templi regarded him curiously from the high tiers. The thinkers, remembrancers, lorekeepers, minute-takers and scribes of the XV Legion were slowly filling up the empty seats.

Magnus the Red sat in a posture of infinite repose, reclined back, idly rotating his staff with the claw-tips of one hand. A faint smile played about his lips.

Hakoris touched his neck.

No claw marks. No crushed windpipe.

He looked down.

His feet were firmly on the ground, no evidence they had left it.

Amon leant towards him.

His expression betrayed genuine concern for a brother.

‘Aqhet?’

Hakoris looked to the ground where Magnus had drawn his Symbol of Thutmose in lines made of aether. He deployed his transhuman powers of recall to retracing the strokes the primarch had used in its formation and…

And it was not the Symbol of Thutmose at all.

Magnus had named it as such and, as every scholar of the aether knew, to name a thing was to give it power. The rune his mind recalled now was similar in formation, but different in its points of emphasis.

Its purpose had not been to keep outside minds from probing this chamber.

It had been to keep *his* mind from the chamber.

He looked up, aghast, to see Djet, with Khaleif and Nepfithu, still kneeling and with heads bowed.

If they had appeared flavourless and shallow before it was because Hakoris himself saw them that way. The entire inquisition had taken place in Hakoris' mind. Magnus had drawn a circle of Prospero's greatest psykers as witnesses and they had not even noticed.

'That which is spoken within these walls will be open to public record,' said Magnus, speaking with the slight drawl of supreme power.

The primarch's hand dropped to the colossal tome of arcane lore, the *Book of Magnus*, that hung from his belt by a chain beside his sword. He tapped the metal binding with a long, tapering nail.

Hakoris' hand slid from his throat.

Magnus smiled.

'I, for one, am eager to learn what you have discovered.'

*Sergeant Aqhet Hakoris, warrior of the fire deserts of Oaus and a legionary of the Thousand Sons, awoke aboard the* Photep. *Medicae equipment blinked and chirped, but in futility, for they had played no role in his awakening. A primarch greeted his return, a demigod whom he had never before encountered except in astral vision, and yet the first thing he looked to was his own hands.*

*Magnus smiled, the indulgent smile of a proud father watching their child for the first time employ a Palmar grasp on a coloured pencil.*

*'My hands,' said Hakoris. 'They are my own.'*

*'Yes,' said Magnus. 'You have been cured of the Flesh Change.'*

*The warrior lowered his hands, and for the first time looked in awe upon his sire and saviour.*

*'How?'*

*There were many questions he might have asked, but he was a brother of the Thousand Sons – this was the only one that mattered.*

*‘Rest now, my son.’*

*‘I must know how,’ said Hakoris. ‘Tell me.’*

*Magnus rose without answering. He had defied his father in order to pass His test and seek His answers, but he was Magnus the Red of Prospero, and he knew his limits.*

*His own sons he expected to be more obedient.*

The planet was Gorrobin, the machinery of crusade was in full motion, and the hour was midnight. Regardless of relativistic or sidereal time or the fluctuations of the Great Ocean, separate even from the actuality of a diurnal cycle, the powers of the Aquilae always waxed most strongly with the onset of midnight.

Hakoris ignited a candle with his mind.

Light flared from nothing, illuminating a pale face, drawn paler by long years of obsession. The bare stone of the old rockcrete pillbox shuddered under distant waves of shelling. Dust sheeted from the ceiling, the candle flame appearing to jink and writhe like a living thing to avoid being doused.

He sat cross-legged within the concentric rings of circles, nonogons, and eightfold stars that he had hand-sketched into the dirt floor. Runes and sigils, years of study represented by unsubtle slash marks in chalk, wax and, where conventional materials eluded him, blood, adorned the walls.

He stared into the flame, working his mind slowly through the Enumerations.

His testimony before the Magisters Templi in the Pyramid of Theret had damned him. He was a leper to the Legion now. His name was poison. The Aquilae had been broken, its membership scattered to new Fellowships across a dozen warzones, and scattered again over the years since. Khaleif, Nepfithu and the others actively cursed his memory. Hakoris still felt the ripples of hatred in the Great Ocean when they did so. Magnus had seized his books. He did not know what had become of them. He had been demoted to line brother, assigned to a small taskforce operating under the command of a sergeant with a psychic mastery seven tiers below his own and a hundred and fifty years his junior. They had been attached to the command chain of the 4011th, of the VIII Legion, tasked with a string of low-level Compliance actions across the crusade front of the Abrint Sector.

It had been nine years.

He had not complained.

Somewhere, no more than a kilometre away, someone screamed.

The candle flickered.

There was freedom in exile. Gorrobin was a long way from the Vitruvian pyramids and Cult temples of Tizca, and from the eye of Magnus the Red. The truth could be ignored, it could be willed into a form of collective fugue if the desire to do so was widespread and powerful enough, but it could not be denied forever.

It had a way of making itself known.

The Great Ocean wanted to be understood. Mankind deserved that knowledge.

He raised his hands to the candle flame.

'*Choronzon*,' he muttered.

The flame bent towards him, and flickered.

He smiled.

His father was wrong. He was right. And he was going to prove it.

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# THE WILL OF THE LEGION

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Captain Hashin Yonnad squeezed his bolt pistol's trigger. The gun boomed as it spat self-propelled micro-missiles down the length of the corridor. Around him the warriors of Breacher Siege Squad Tybo added their fire to his, each Iron Armour-clad battle-brother expertly plying his boltgun over the rim of his shield.

At the corridor's far end, their targets were blown messily apart. Rangy human warriors in brightly patterned enviro-armour detonated as though each had swallowed a grenade in some obscene suicide pact.

*In turning their guns upon the ships of the Third Expeditionary Fleet, these Driftborn may as well have done just that,* thought Yonnad. He advanced, reloading as he went. Blood and pulverised meat dripped from the walls and ceiling onto the Imperial Fists as they passed.

'No small thing, to see such bloodletting aboard the *Tribune*, eh, captain?' asked Sergeant Tybo over the squad vox as they clattered up a flight of iron steps. They passed their Legion's sigil, embossed upon the walls in semi-

precious metals and lit red by the strobe of alarm lumens.

‘It will not last long,’ Yonnad replied. ‘Our enemies fight with vicious tenacity, but they have nothing to truly threaten the Legiones Astartes. When the ships of the Third Expeditionary Fleet entered their domain, they should have capitulated at once. The Consus Drift might have been a staging post. Instead they force us to make of it a mass grave.’

He shook his head and sighed. ‘Wasteful.’

They emerged into an intersection and were met by another hail of bullets that clanged from power armour and boarding shields.

This latest band of boarders had dragged heavy munitions crates into a crude barricade. Checking his auto-senses’ map of the *Tribune* he saw that the fighting had brought him almost to the ship’s outer hull.

‘This position was intended as a last-ditch defence for the enemy’s beachhead,’ opined Tybo.

‘Perhaps, in their ignorance, they never believed it would be needed,’ Yonnad replied. Certainly, the fire from behind the barricade was ragged and haphazard, easily shrugged off by Tybo’s legionaries.

‘Break them,’ Yonnad ordered.

Shields interlocking, bolters fore, the Breachers pressed forward. Their guns thundered, the sound filling the intersection and drowning out the terrified screams of their enemies. Pale-skinned, dark-eyed Driftborn were torn to pieces and the stench of blood and ordure filled the air. Some tried to fire back with their boarding rifles and wide-muzzled pistols.

*Futile*, thought Yonnad, *pitifully so*.

The bullets barely marred the legionaries’ shields. By comparison, simply standing against the Space Marines’ blizzard of fire was to die. A dozen Driftborn did so in the first seconds of the gunfight; another half a dozen followed them moments later, and then the last of their number were fleeing down the corridor in animal terror.

‘Follow. We finish this.’

At their captain’s command the Breachers bulled their way through the ill-fated barricade, their heavy boots crushing ruptured corpses into the deck plates as they strode relentlessly after the retreating Driftborn.

Through another bulkhead door, down a chevroned ramp between thumping pistons the size of gunships; Yonnad noticed amber warnings

appearing on his auto-senses as air-oxygen content and external temperature both dropped steadily.

‘The fools must have made an imperfect breach with our hull,’ said Sergeant Tybo in disgust. ‘Sloppy.’

Yonnad passed through one last doorway, a wide portal whose mechanisms still sparked where the Driftborn had forced entry. Then the enemy were before him, what was left of them at least. Twenty-two men and women knelt upon the decking of a fire-damaged servitor bay, looking as pale and lifeless as the corpse-machines that dangled on armatures above them. They were shivering violently, Yonnad saw, those without respirator masks gasping for breath in the thin air.

Behind them yawned the boarding jaws of their attack craft, its ramshackle interior lit by stuttering lumens. Before them lay their weapons, set down in obvious surrender.

Yonnad’s auto-senses highlighted four separate micro-fractures around the boarding craft, where its rudimentary blast-foam dispensers had failed to properly seal the craft into the hull. At the rate the air was whistling away through those gaps and the cold of the void creeping in, he estimated the defeated Driftborn could survive in this chamber for a few minutes more at most.

‘What do we do with them?’ asked Tybo, his voice dispassionate.

‘They have surrendered and will be made Compliant,’ Yonnad replied, allowing his words to echo from his helm’s vox-grille. ‘They are not tainted xenos, but lost children of humanity and as such shall be afforded the light of the Imperial Truth.’ He had heard the Driftborn giving orders and shouting battle cries, and while their dialect was somewhat adrift of Terran standard, it was close enough that mutual understanding could be easily achieved. Sure enough he saw some amongst the Driftborn relax minutely. A few faces looked up in hope.

That hope spread, if only slightly, as the Imperial Fists gestured with their bolters for the captives to rise and exit the chamber. They did as they were bidden, walking two by two, hands on their heads with Brother Lordyan walking at their fore and the rest of the squad bringing up the rear. Yonnad was the last to leave, runemarking the site for immediate attention by the ship’s servitor repair clades.

‘We do not want to risk their boarding craft wrenching free from the hull

and causing a breach,’ said Yonnad, then froze as script flowed across his auto-senses. A priority summons for him and the veteran legionaries of Squad Tybo, issued from embarkation deck six.

‘Other side of the ship,’ Tybo commented, already detailing two of his brothers to detach themselves and deliver the prisoners.

‘We will take the turbolifts,’ replied Yonnad.

‘What do you suppose this means?’ asked Tybo.

‘We will find out soon enough, sergeant,’ said Yonnad and set off with Tybo and his squad following close on his heels.

Despite the marvels of Imperial technology it still took Yonnad and his companions almost thirteen minutes to reach the embarkation deck, such was the size of the warship aboard which they travelled. On their way they saw plentiful signs that the *Tribune* was still engaged in the ongoing void war: servitor repair clades lumbered down strobe-lit corridors, their servo-armatures sparking as they sought out battle damage to minister to; Legion helots hastened past, some towing racked ammunition tenders, all pausing every few moments to brace themselves against grab handles and wall stanchions as the *Tribune* shuddered under the impact of macro munitions; squads of Imperial Fists legionaries jogged with crashing footfalls up ironclad stairways and along swaying gantrywalks.

‘Making for the last pockets of border resistance, no doubt,’ commented Sergeant Tybo as another squad passed them in the opposite direction.

‘The ship will soon be cleansed of their presence,’ replied Yonnad.

‘Do you think it will stop there?’ asked Tybo, sounding almost disappointed at the thought.

‘Doubtful, brother,’ said Yonnad, eyeing his choleric comrade askance. ‘The chance tides of the warp brought us to this place just as they brought its human inhabitants before us. Yet the welcome they showed us was to tear into the vessels of the Imperial Army with boarding craft and the long guns of their asteroid cities. They set upon us like jackylworms upon an ice-stalker’s corpse. Were you the primarch, would you swiftly forgive such an insult?’

‘It is not for us to speak for the thoughts or deeds of our sire, Captain Yonnad,’ Tybo replied, a frown in his voice.

‘True enough, but whether we say it aloud or not, you know that Lord

Dorn is not given to mercy nor forgiveness,’ said Yonnad, certainty growing within him that he knew what he would see as they entered the embarkation deck.

Sure enough, as they clattered up a last flight of steps and emerged onto an upper gantry, the embarkation deck spread out before them, full of the rigidly controlled pandemonium that characterised the martial preparations of a Space Marine Legion preparing to unleash its might. Stormbirds idled in launch-clamps, searing energies simmering deep within their ramjets. Squad after squad of veteran Breachers, Cataphractii Terminators and a few Templar brethren stood in serried ranks or knelt as they took their oaths of moment. Ammunition and fuel canisters passed through the air on servo-hoists or moved through the press aboard rumbling carriages. Yonnad saw Captain Ushent of the 177th Company also present, and Captain Paros, the infamous ‘Wall-breaker’ of the 193rd.

It all faded in Yonnad’s sight, though, like the shadowed corners of a chamber illuminated by a single, stark lumen.

‘The primarch,’ breathed one of Tybo’s warriors, awe in his voice.

Dorn stood amidst it all, a pillar of carved stone rising immovable from amidst the whirling tides of motion. His armour was gilded magnificence given redoubtable form. *Storm’s Teeth,* Dorn’s immense chainblade, hung at the primarch’s hip like the promise of annihilation to come. Yet it was to Dorn’s graven visage that Yonnad found his eyes drawn, as they always were when he found himself in his gene-sire’s presence: set as though in impermeable marble, mouth a humourless line, brows knitted in thunderous displeasure, eyes like chips of mica and lit from within by an uncompromising zeal that Yonnad felt like a physical force, even from this distance.

‘No, there will be no forgiveness this day,’ said the captain as he got Tybo’s squad moving again. ‘We have defended our fastness. Now, I think, we shall test ourselves against theirs.’

The thought should have filled him with righteous joy, for what greater purpose was there in life than to fight in the shadow of the primarch himself in the name of the Emperor’s crusade of unification? Yet as he hastened down a ferrosteel stairway to join the muster, Yonnad could not suppress the surge of disquiet he felt. These people had made a horrible error of judgement in attacking the primarch’s fleet, but their ill judgement did not

make them any less human, any less redeemable or potentially Compliant.

‘I hope that when Lord Dorn is done with their punishment, there will be enough of them left alive to learn the lesson he teaches,’ said Yonnad to Tybo.

The sergeant did not offer a response.

Bare minutes later, Captain Yonnad sat in his restraint throne aboard the Stormbird *Hammer of Terra* as it streaked out from the *Tribune*’s embarkation deck and into the fire-lit turmoil of the void. Peripheral vid-feeds and data schematics updated constantly in his auto-senses, providing Yonnad with up-to-the-minute intelligence on the war’s progress.

He could see the asteroid cities of the Driftborn where they hung in the darkness, tethered one to the next by bridging spars fashioned from cannibalised shipwrecks. Around them swarmed crimson runes designating squadrons of defensive craft, while more red runes flurried like wind-driven snow across the void field to intersect with the pulsing yellow signifiers of the Third Expeditionary Fleet.

Some of the latter were translucent and cold, marking out warships and supply craft slain while they were still attempting to unshroud their auspicators. Yet many more shone with angry defiance, wheeling and flowing with expert precision as their captains reforged their formation and responded to the ill-disciplined Driftborn ambush.

Watching the data with his strategist’s practised eye, Yonnad could see that the enemy were already faltering.

‘They believed, no doubt, that sufficient surprise, panic and early losses would cause us to capitulate,’ he muttered over closed vox to Sergeant Tybo. ‘I cannot imagine how scarce resources must be in this forsaken reach of space. We must have presented a rich prize indeed to have made them so desperately reckless.’

Imperial warships were surrounding the enemy craft in packs, hammering them from multiple directions and picking them apart even as Imperial Fists assault companies scoured the shocked boarders from the last of the fleet’s compromised craft. Meanwhile, the *Tribune* drove forward at the spear-tip of a tight flotilla of Imperial Fists warships, carving unstoppably through the enemy’s ramshackle frigates and cruisers towards the cities the Driftborn called home.

All this Yonnad saw and understood. Still, he struggled to keep his attention upon the wider battle for, to his great surprise, Lord Dorn himself had boarded *Hammer of Terra* before it leapt from its restraints. The primarch now stood near the fore of the gunship's troop compartment, boots mag-locked to the deck, his white hair touching its ceiling. He was amongst his sons, but ever singular and alone. Dorn's face was veiled by the crimson shadows of the Stormbird's interior lumens, but his posture spoke of simmering anger held tightly in check. The gunship shuddered and jolted as munitions detonated in the void around it, but the primarch barely shifted his posture as he rode out the violent motions.

*What are we doing?* Yonnad thought as the Stormbird thundered on through the void. He took a deep breath and addressed the silent primarch.

'My lord. Respectfully, why have we not yet been briefed upon our mission? We would know your plans that we might best serve them.'

Rather than reply directly to Yonnad, the primarch instead activated a priority vox-channel. Yonnad saw that it linked to every Space Marine aboard the six Stormbirds that had leapt from the *Tribune*'s embarkation deck, and were now streaking in loose formation between the tumbling wrecks and bludgeoning volleys of the void war.

'My sons,' Dorn began, and as always Captain Yonnad felt an undercurrent of exhilaration and awe at the low rumble of his primarch's voice.

*Is this what the deluded faithful experience?* he wondered, not for the first time. *The ones not yet brought into the light of the Imperial Truth? The ones who believe in primitive deities? In gods?* The thought unsettled him; the Imperial Fists were loyal to their primarch, utterly and unquestioningly so, but theirs was not the blind zealotry of the superstitious or the fanatical.

'Our enemies have shown courage and martial prowess,' the primarch continued. 'They have displayed, also, a lamentable lack of wisdom. The former characteristics can be harnessed to humanity's benefit, but only if their foolishness can first be remedied.'

*He sounds truly furious,* thought Yonnad. He had heard only the tiniest tremor in Dorn's voice, a miniscule fault line running through the word 'foolishness'. For one as stonily reserved as the primarch of the Imperial Fists, however, such a small tell meant much. Lord Dorn believed in the Great Crusade and the reunification of humanity – believed in it more completely perhaps than any of his brothers, or so it was said.

*That belief makes him the greatest of our species' champions, save the Emperor Himself*, thought Yonnad with fierce pride. But he had also seen what Lord Dorn's belief had wrought of those who opposed the Emperor's goals, and his sense of foreboding grew as the primarch spoke on.

'We will offer these Driftborn one chance to embrace Imperial enlightenment. One chance more than they offered our void-lost dead. As I speak, boarding torpedoes, Caestus assault rams and concentrated bombardments are clearing landing sites for your craft in the heartlands of the largest asteroid cities. Each Stormbird has its own designated objective. Hundreds of your brothers assail the cities' outer defences and slaved defence platforms to prevent enemy reinforcements responding to our landings. They fight for victory but it is you who shall secure it. This Compliance will be swift and decisive. Fight for Terra, my sons.'

*Why only the Legiones Astartes?* Yonnad wondered as the Stormbirds' runes divided in his auto-senses and he felt *Hammer of Terra* accelerating again. *Why no supporting units of Imperial Army? Would that not see Compliance achieved all the more swiftly?* Were it up to him Yonnad would first have neutralised the enemy's outnumbered void assets and picked off the long guns that jutted from their asteroid cities. Once the foe's fangs had been pulled, neat and efficient, he would have enfolded the enemy's civilisation and struck with overwhelming force. Such methods had ensured swift Compliance before, and while they certainly would have led to a more protracted conflict they would have ensured Imperial losses were minimised.

Their craft shuddered as explosions rippled outside of its hull, and Yonnad felt the telltale jolts as the Stormbird fired back. He accessed the craft's external vid-feed in time to see several light trans-atmospheric fighter craft disintegrating into puffs of fire and spinning wreckage that rattled from the Stormbird's hull. The heavy gunships swept on untroubled, and now Yonnad saw their designated asteroid city swelling amidst the blackness of the void. It was a nugget of light and shadow the size of a coin, then it was a mass of rock and metal and glowing lights the size of his fist, then larger and larger and Yonnad could see illuminated city-domes and tunnel networks sprawling across the trammelled asteroid. Scavenger-built bridgeways lashed it to smaller asteroidal townships and clan-halls that in turn joined with other, more distant masses in a fragile bond of survivors'

unity.

Fires burned where Imperial Fists assault forces had already touched down, or where the relentless pounding of lance batteries and barrage bombs had flayed hab-domes open to the airless void.

Bodies floated in space, clouds of them thick as ash-flakes rising from a pyre.

Ruby beams of light leapt up to claw at *Hammer of Terra* as the beleaguered Driftborn sought to prevent yet more Imperial Fists landing within their city's bounds. The pilots of the VII Legion knew their duty, however, and few of the panicked blasts even came close. The strategic map showed that battle-brothers from the 88th and 193rd companies were pushing into the city from the south and east. Meanwhile Breacher squads had penetrated the tunnel network that honeycombed the asteroid and were striking from below at its orbital defences, neutralising them one after another. Yet the Imperial Fists were certainly not having it all their own way.

'Looks as though the Driftborn are putting up a fight to be proud of, eh?' said Tybo over a private vox-channel. 'Sounds like they've got some serious firepower down there!'

'Who knows how many centuries they have maintained this civilisation, how many warships they've scavenged from, what fragmentary shards of Old Night weapons tech they may have access to?' Yonnad replied as the Stormbird howled and shuddered in its final descent. The primarch, he noted, had deigned to take hold of a grab handle for this last steep dive but otherwise he had moved not a muscle. Nor did he speak, and in Dorn's silence Yonnad read that responsibility for ground command would, for now, lie with him as senior ranking officer.

'Legionaries of the Seventh, make ready to prosecute the foe,' Yonnad barked through his helm's vox-grille. Twenty veteran Space Marines responded, Breachers crashing fists against breastplates. Weapons were raised and flight restraints released. From outside came the muffled roar of weapons discharge, then a dull *crump* as something exploded with enough violence to make the Stormbird lurch.

Then the craft was on the ground, its ramp slamming down to admit billowing smoke and screaming human voices. Yonnad led his brothers out into the hard glare of Asteroid City Six.

The Stormbird had blasted a hole through the roof of a squat, armoured dome and put down amidst a rockcrete-floored plaza in which Yonnad realised a market must have been in full swing less than an hour before. Emergency void fields had snapped on the moment the dome had been breached, preventing explosive decompression from emptying the structure. That had done little to spare the place, however.

Wrecked stalls and lean-tos burned fiercely, plastek sheeting spewing filthy fumes as it curled and melted. Barter-goods carpeted the floor in surreal profusion: pieces of machinery, from scatterings of tiny brass cogs to man-high enginarius blocks and excised servitor augmetics; vac-wrapped nutri-blocks and charred vermin on sticks; brightly pigmented jars of paste; glittering gewgaws and gaudy items of jewellery; scavenged firearms and improvised mauls fashioned from plasteel rebar; a parchment parasol, lying miraculously open and unscathed amongst singed heaps of clothing – the profusion was bewildering.

Amongst the wreckage of the barter-market lay human bodies, dozens of them sprawled and burst and blackened by the fury of war. They looked miserably pitiful, thought Yonnad, despite the melted guns they still clutched in death. More figures haunted the dome's fringes, however, and these still lived. With bullets and las-bolts whipping in towards the disembarking Space Marines, and the primarch now striding down the ramp in their wake, he had no time to offer the fallen Driftborn anything more than a glance.

'Shields up,' ordered Yonnad, allowing his voice to ring out as a vox-amplified boom that filled the dome. His warriors complied with a crash of metal on metal then advanced, shots pinging and whining from their armoured bulwark to little effect. A new designator was flashing on Yonnad's auto-senses now, just as the primarch had said it would. Their objective, he saw, was a larger dome, heavily defended and located a bare four hundred metres to the north.

*Command and Control Asset alpha-primus,* he read as it flashed below the rune. *Strategic and… environmental regulation hub.* Yonnad's disquiet became dread as he read those words and understood what his gene-sire intended. It was strategically sound, ruthlessly efficient and utterly black and white in its nature.

*Capitulate, you fools,* he thought as he gunned down another Driftborn.

Yet they did not. Instead, the servo-hatch at their back yawned open and vomited forth another wave of screaming warriors clad in brightly patterned enviro-suits and wielding powerful las-blasters. To Yonnad's right a howling energy beam punched through Brother Lorsan's shield and the armoured torso behind it. To his back the primarch advanced, brows knitted in a thunderous frown, weapons not even drawn.

*He does not deem these foes worthy of the fight,* Yonnad thought and knew what was expected of him. And no matter his reservations, Hashin Yonnad of the 39th Household of Inwit always did his duty.

'Advance and destroy,' he ordered in his booming voice, firing his pistol again and again as he broke into a charge. 'In the name of Lord Dorn and the Emperor!'

They met the stiffest resistance within the strategic hub. As Yonnad and his warriors stormed through the smouldering remains of the armoured bulkhead doors they were met by a hail of las-fire that tore glowing rents in shields and punched lances of light through armour, flesh and bone.

The captain advanced through billowing smoke and flicker-strobes of light. War cries boomed and voices screamed in pain around him. Heavy brass control consoles and banks of glowing monitors showered sparks as bolt shells and las-blasts ploughed through them. Figures moved, half-glimpsed wraiths amidst the turmoil of battle.

'Brothers, place your shots, do not damage instruments that you need not,' Yonnad commanded, then ducked aside reflexively. An energised blade cut the air where his head had been, crackling angrily as its wielder swung it with desperate strength. The warrior emerged from the roiling smoke, her enviro-suit more heavily armoured than those he had seen so far, her face a riot of colourful clan sigils and vivid warpaint.

*Some caste of elite warriors,* thought Yonnad, bringing his power sword up to parry her next swing. She was smaller than him, her armour more lightweight and flexible, but if she had hoped lithe speed would be a match against lumbering brute strength, she was soon disappointed. The captain traded a flurry of blows with the guard, her energy blade spitting and sparking each time it met his. Then, spotting a miniscule opening in her balance, he lunged inside her guard and drove the hilt of his blade into the woman's face.

Bone cracked. Blood sprayed. The warrior flew backwards, rebounded from a console and lay still, her blade crackling and burning.

Yonnad had no time to enjoy his victory as ruby beams of light stabbed out at him. He dodged again but not before one of the blasts had raked an agonising wound down the captain's right arm.

'Enough of this, Lord Dorn expects,' cried Yonnad.

Raising his bolt pistol, he fired back into the murk and saw a humanoid figure burst bloodily apart.

'Breachers, corral and contain. Eliminate the marksmen then finish the swordsmen.'

On his auto-senses, Yonnad saw his remaining battle-brothers move to obey with rigid efficiency. Where las-blasts flashed out, hails of bolt shells answered. Where energy blades cracked and fizzed in the gloom they rebounded from sturdy boarding shields while their wielders were overwhelmed and beaten down by the Imperial Fists' sheer, armoured might.

The smoke was clearing now, drawn away by chugging atmospheric filtrators. As it went Yonnad saw that precious few foes remained to oppose them. Three Imperial Fists had fallen, but in return the enemy had lost perhaps thirty of what must surely have been their finest troops. The last survivors were surrounded, making a stand from a raised circular dais ringed with brass consoles and crowned by a dangling mass of screens, pipes and cables. Pale-skinned civilian personnel could be seen cowering behind them, their faces drawn in rictuses of terror.

Before the Imperial Fists could finish the slaughter, a huge figure moved at their backs. Lord Dorn had not rushed to keep pace with their advance, instead simply striding through the enemy's fastness as though walking the corridors of the *Phalanx* itself. Now, though, he ducked through the hub's ruined doorway and the sheer crushing weight of his presence seemed to expand until it filled the entire room. The defenders' weapons dropped from their nerveless fingers. They raised shaking hands in surrender, most sinking to their knees as they stared aghast at the god of war who had stepped into their midst.

Dorn didn't spare them a glance. Instead he looked to Yonnad and issued commands the captain had hoped not to hear.

'Captain Yonnad. Have Techmarine Covenants move up and interface with

City Six's environmental master controls. Route all functionality through a single console then await my command.'

The task took bare minutes to complete. Several of the Legion's Techmarines went to work, aided by vacuous servitor thralls. As they laboured over sparking instrument panels and installed lengths of trunking cable, the last handful of the hub's defenders were led away at gunpoint. Yonnad arranged Tybo and Pollas' surviving Breachers in defensive positions through the hub's adjoining corridors. As he did so he kept half an ear on the exchanges flitting across the strategic vox-net, both throughout Asteroid City Six and further afield where the other Stormbirds had touched down.

*'This is Captain Jorian reporting strategic hub secure, City Four. Minimal losses. Techmarines attending as ordered…'*

*'…moving up to flank their barricades, brothers. Hold position until…'*

*'…Gun nest confirmed neutralised. Nothing but wreckage now. Advancing on…'*

*'…Brother-Sergeant Maxim is down, assuming command and repeating request for reinforcement against enemy counter-push at…'*

'They're still resisting us,' Yonnad muttered. 'Everything they have is here. Their families. Their lives. They think we mean to do to them what they would have done to us, rob and strip and subjugate, and they will not give in to that without a fight. They don't realise the magnitude of what they face. But they soon will.'

By this point, he was back in the strategic hub and stood before the control bank into which all of City Six's environmental controls had been routed. A heavy set of switches jutted from the console's right-hand panel, rubber-handled things that looked weighty and ominous to Yonnad's eye. Perhaps it was only because he knew now what they would extinguish, should they be flipped.

Light. Air. Heat. Life.

*No wonder we were ordered to remain helmed,* he thought. *No wonder the primarch did not want the army here.*

He glanced back at Dorn, who stood unmoving as a statue at the heart of the strategic hub. The primarch had listened to the vox reports as each strategic hub was secured, as the Techmarines moved in to do their work, as the defenders of City Three launched a frantic counter-assault and were

annihilated by Cataphractii battle-brothers who teleported direct from the *Tribune*.

Now, at last, as the final confirmation came in of readiness at City One, he took a slow, deep breath. With a thought, the primarch sent a command rune beaming out to every single Imperial military asset engaged throughout the Consus Drift.

*Cease fire. Hold and await further instruction.*

Yonnad could imagine the bewilderment of the Driftborn as their enemies suddenly put up their weapons. Warriors who moments before had cowered behind ragged barricades now found their attackers falling back to defensive positions of their own. Ship captains would be seizing their chance to limp away from the behemoths that surrounded them, hastening to order corpsmen and engineers in to do what they could.

*Only the very foolish will believe this a reprieve*, Yonnad thought. *The wise will see this silence for the ominous pause that it is, and wonder what horrors come next*.

They did not have to wait long to find out. Raising his head, Rogal Dorn began to speak. As he did so, his voice was carried through the Imperial comms networks to broadcast from every Space Marine vox-grille, every sequestered speaker horn and transmission emitter throughout the asteroid cities.

‘Driftborn, I am Primarch Rogal Dorn of the Imperial Fists Space Marine Legion,’ he began, and his voice echoed like menacing thunder through the tunnels, domes and warships of the enemy. ‘I address you on behalf of the Emperor of all mankind and I give you this one chance to surrender. Were we to press this conflict we would have to all but exterminate you before you would capitulate, and for that I honour you. But I tell you now, you will not have that chance.’

Yonnad stood before the console, breathing slowly and steadily, feeling his twin hearts thump sickly in his chest. It was not that he shrank from the righteous prosecution of the foe, for no threat to the Imperium could be permitted to endure, be it xenoform or human in nature. Yonnad would fight any battle, face any foe, and he would do it gladly. But what might come next was not battle; it was extermination.

‘I see you, who you are, what you value most,’ Dorn continued. ‘Understand me now. When I finish speaking, you will offer your

immediate and unconditional surrender. You will submit to the Imperial Truth and offer your immediate compliance. If you do not do this, I will extinguish all life support systems throughout your asteroid cities. Your armies, those they fight to protect, your very civilisation, all will perish at my command.'

*Capitulate,* thought Yonnad, his hands hovering over the switches. *In the name of whatever heathen gods you hold dear, do not doubt that my Lord Dorn will give the command. And do not doubt that I will follow it.*

Yonnad felt something akin to horror at that thought. In that moment he was more deeply conflicted than he had ever been in all his long and bloody years. Not because he doubted whether he would have the will to follow his primarch's deadly command, but because he knew that he *would* follow that order without a moment's hesitation should it be given.

*We are meant to be liberators, not butchers,* Yonnad thought. *Is it so easy for me to obey him in this without question? Should it be?*

Yonnad tried to tell himself that he could do this because he recognised the threat that these people represented to the fledgling Imperium. He dismissed the notion impatiently as soon as it came; what threat could a stranded civilisation of scavenging pirates offer to the star-spanning glory of the Imperium?

*Perhaps it is because I see, instead, the greater peril to Imperial morale should the Emperor's Legiones Astartes show leniency,* he thought. *If we were to issue such an ultimatum and then fail to carry it out, how might that story spread? How might word of it empower those who truly do present a threat to the Emperor's realm?*

He hoped that was the case. Yet in truth, Captain Yonnad thought it likely that his obedience would come from the simple fact that his gene-sire had issued a command and, no matter its cost or consequence, his sons would see it done.

*What does that say of our enlightened Imperium, or we its exemplars?*

'Do not fool yourselves that I will show compassion. Do not tell one another that it cannot be, that I would not do something so monstrous. I am an architect of humanity's galactic destiny, and set against the interstellar unification of our entire species, your lives and those of all you hold dear are as nothing at all. Choose now, Driftborn. Surrender and become part of that magnificent destiny, or die here, now, as a people, and be forgotten

amidst the airless, frozen dark.’

Dorn fell silent. Yonnad watched the seconds ticking past on his helm-chronometer. His hands hovered over the controls that would slaughter a city, his breath stilled in his chest. He felt the moment draw out, felt his hope for these people fade and somehow sensed his hope for himself fading with it.

*They won’t do it. They don’t believe him. They’re going to choose death, and Terra preserve me I will give it to them*.

‘*They’re setting down their arms!’* came a voice over the vox, and Yonnad froze, barely daring to believe it.

‘*City Three, visual confirmation of enemy capitulation,*’ came another voice. ‘*The Driftborn have surrendered. Repeat, the Driftborn have surrendered.’*

‘*City Five, here also. They have set down their arms.’*

‘*This is Captain Tolas of the* Redemption*, reporting enemy ships shrouding guns and powering down their thrusters. We have surrender in the void.’*

The reports kept flooding in, but Yonnad barely heard them. He moved his hands away from the controls and brought them carefully back to his sides. At his back he sensed rather than saw Dorn nod in satisfaction then turn and sweep from the hub, his work complete.

*Did he ever really doubt they would surrender?* Yonnad wondered. He took a breath, then began barking out orders over the vox. Compliance had been achieved; what came next would require his full talents as an organiser and logistician to help coordinate and he threw himself into the duties gladly. Yet as he too strode from the command hub to be about his duties, Hashin Yonnad could not quite purge one lingering question from his mind.

*Do we obey the primarch because we know him to be right, or do we obey simply because he is our primarch? And in the end, are those two facts truly one and the same, or are they not…?*

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# COUNCIL OF TRUTH

Mike Brooks

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In the cold dark of space, the faint light of distant stars glints off the scarred and pitted hulls of mighty vessels. An expeditionary fleet of Terra, the primal might of humanity’s cradle given form, hangs in the void. Within the metal cocoons of precious atmosphere that has been wrenched by techno-sorcery from the bare elements of the cosmos, scurry innumerable humans of the Imperial Fleet and the Imperial Army: remembrancers and thralls, tech-priests of Mars and, greatest of all, the gene-enhanced warriors of the Legiones Astartes.

But this is unlike most expeditionary fleets. While its kin might proudly boast their nature and heritage with towering sigils emblazoned on the flanks of their ships, endless broadcasts of vox and machine-code declaring the glory of Terra and its Emperor, or even vast void-banners, this fleet runs dark, and near-silent. Only the faintest markings denote a difference between craft, and even these conform to no system recognisable to outsiders. For those who have some awareness, however, this very lack of

identification provides a clue as to the nature of the force, for only the XX Legion, the Alpha Legion, traverse the galaxy so anonymously.

One thing that cannot be hidden is the size of a vessel, although even that may not be a true witness to its capabilities. Nonetheless, the ship currently known as the *Alpha* is a first amongst equals here: a mighty Gloriana-class battleship that functions, at least sometimes, as the flagship of the primarch Alpharius. There are certain features of a battleship that cannot easily be altered – the placement of the engines, the warp drive, the Navigator's chamber, or the bridge, for example – and yet the interior of the *Alpha* has still undergone subtle changes since it was first launched. Corridor and level designations no longer follow sequential norms, or may appear to change those designations partway through their course. Floor plans have been altered, not only from the original layout, but also in relation to the decks above and below. Here and there, bulkheads now cut corridors in half, or turbolift shafts no longer traverse the craft's full height. Should a hostile force board the ship, their surroundings will make little sense, and attempts to coordinate movements will be difficult in the extreme.

Which is, of course, the point.

There are many chambers within the ship: huge, grandly lit auditoriums and stark, functional war rooms; individual berths and dark, claustrophobic cells in which pain can be applied to captives, should such a thing become necessary for the Legion to fulfil its current task. Alpharius currently occupies none of these, but is instead within a small chamber in which a semicircle of slightly raised benches surround a single seat. The warriors of the Legiones Astartes do not need to sit, but sit they do while they are in this chamber, because sometimes unaugmented humans in service to the Alpha Legion are present, who lack such hardiness. Today, however, only three others are there, besides Alpharius, and they all wear the armour of the Emperor's finest armies.

This is the Chamber of Truth. In here, an individual may be questioned: not as precursor to punishment, but to provide clarity. In here, the interrogators' questions may not be in line with their own sentiments. In here, truth is stretched out and examined, magnified and scrutinised, so that all may leave with a greater understanding of its nature than when they entered.

The primarch of the XX Legion sits in the seat, resplendent in his crested,

scaled helm. His questioners sit on the front rank of benches, and each is dressed in plate that is marked with the sigil of the Legion, but is otherwise unadorned with symbols denoting rank or identity. They appear as featureless, genderless and anonymous as any battle automata of the Legio Cybernetica, and yet each is a transhuman warrior brought forth by the gene-sorcery of the Emperor of Mankind.

‘Tesstra has fallen,’ says the first questioner. ‘The Tesstran Conservation has entered Compliance and will now be folded into the bosom of the Imperium of Man.’

‘Indeed,’ the primarch replies, with a nod.

‘Shortly after this campaign began,’ the second questioner states, ‘Lord Guilliman of the Ultramarines publicly criticised you, in open council. He called into question your tactics, your methodology, and indeed your commitment.’

‘And many may feel that he was correct to do so,’ adds the third questioner. ‘At that point, the Ultramarines had made tangible progress in bringing Compliance to the outer reaches of the Conservation, and their ultimate victory already appeared inevitable. Our Legion had been raiding to little appreciable effect.’

‘Lord Guilliman demanded that you should follow his methodology of warfare,’ the second questioner continues. ‘He further demanded that you should cede control of your Legion to him for the duration of the campaign, so that it might be prosecuted correctly, and total Compliance achieved within months. Why did you not do this, when he was the more experienced Imperial campaigner present in the theatre of war? Even if you decided not to cede control, why did you not adhere to his strategies, which have been proven again and again on the battlefield? Or for that matter, the strategies of any of the other Legiones Astartes?’

The primarch nods slightly, in acknowledgement of the question.

‘Roboute claimed he could bring Compliance within months. I brought it within weeks.’

‘That is an admirable justification after the event,’ the first questioner states. ‘Unless you have a gift of precognition, it does not provide an explanation for your actions at the time.’

The faintest hint of a chuckle emerges from within the primarch’s helm. ‘A fair point. I ignored Roboute’s demands because his vision of war, like the

rest of my brothers', is blinkered. They see war as a purely martial pursuit, the setting of warrior against warrior in order to establish dominance.

'They each pursue it in a different manner, of course. Corax and the Khan seek to bleed the enemy through a thousand cuts. Rogal wishes them to break themselves on his strength, Perturabo breaks theirs instead. Angron overwhelms with utter force and ferocity, Russ does the same, albeit with a tighter focus. Roboute, the Lion, Horus – they all use their gifts, and their gifts are tremendous, to bring the enemy to battle where they wish, and then outmanoeuvre them mentally as well as physically in order to bring victory.'

'And they achieve this,' the third questioner states. 'The Imperium continues to expand, bringing its light to humanity and eradicating the xenos threats it encounters, and your brothers have been the spearheads of that expansion.'

'It does, and they have,' the primarch agrees. 'Truly, my brothers are to be admired for how they and their Legions have overcome their enemies on the field of battle. And yet still, they are blinkered.

'For all their gifts, subterfuge is rarely amongst them. Roboute would never consider that by announcing himself, he gives his enemies a weapon. He lays down his tactics, disseminates them, trumpets them for all to hear. Do not mistake me – even knowing his methodology, an enemy would still be hard-pressed to best him, but with every battle he fights and every victory he achieves, his pattern grows clearer. Any army commanded by Roboute can be predicted. It may still emerge triumphant, but it is predictable. In the same manner, any enemy can know that the World Eaters will attempt to break them with brute force. That knowledge may not be enough to allow them to resist, but they know what form the assault will take.'

The primarch spreads his hands.

'An enemy's capacity to resist is sorely limited if they do not know who they are fighting, or where their opponents are. They are even less capable of resistance if they do not yet know that they are fighting at all.'

*The walls were hot, and the strong summer wind whipped up the dust and flung it at the city. Prime, the capital of Tesstra and the beating heart of the Tesstran Conservation, squatted under the sun like an amphibian caught*

*too far from the refreshing embrace of water. The seasonal rains would come soon, as the continent's heated land mass sucked in moisture-laden air from the ocean, but for now the earth was cracking, the plants were yellow and wilting, and the sun glared off every window and piece of exposed metalwork as though it sought to nail unwary eyeballs to the back of the skull in which they rode.*

*It was no weather in which to be on the walls in full battle-kit, but Birth-Trooper Ussuril had no choice in the matter. The Conservation's strict eugeno-caste system meant his role had been decided even before he had been conceived: he came from trooper stock, and so trooper stock was what he was. In days past, being a birth-trooper had not actually been such a bad role, for depredations on the Conservation by hostile xenos species were reasonably rare, and significant social unrest was infrequent. You drilled and you paraded, you slept in the barracks and ate in the mess, and if you exhibited no abnormalities you would be allowed to breed. It was a simple life, and if Ussuril ever cast longing glances at the high spires and shining towers of those born to greater things, he needed only to see the malnourished wrecks of those born into the lowest stations to remind himself that he had not been dealt a bad hand.*

*That had changed when the so-called Imperium had arrived.*

*Word had filtered through from the outer planets, word of a new alliance of humanity that had also survived the centuries of darkness, and which had now found its way to the Conservation. However, they were a warlike, barbaric people, and when the Conservation had refused to submit, they had attacked. Official reports had been few in number since war had been officially announced, but rumours had a way of percolating through the military. A picture was coming into focus: that of an implacable, measured advance by the Imperium, methodically consuming the Conservation from the outside in.*

*And then everything had changed again.*

*Lightning raids on Tesstra itself, far beyond the active battle zones, had brought the planet, and especially its capital, onto high alert. Priority targets hadn't been hit – they were far too well defended, and the Imperials too craven – but the simple fact of the attacks was worrying enough: how had the Imperium managed to penetrate this far into the Conservation? And how did this new, ghostly, hit-and-run strategy match with the workmanlike*

*campaign in the outer reaches?*

*And then the raids had stopped.*

*'It's the waiting that gets you,' Baras said from beside him. They were from the same birth-unit, their conception timed along with dozens of others so they would all be birthed at the same time, be raised and developed at the same rate, and know each other from their earliest understandings. Such links forged a comradeship that, according to the gene-smiths, could not be bettered by any other fighting force in the galaxy.*

*'It's the guns that get you,' Hassar disagreed, from Ussuril's other side. He was chewing burril leaf, and it was staining his teeth purple. 'I'll take my chances with the waiting.'*

*'It's the sun that gets me,' Ussuril admitted. He was sweating in his combat rig, even though the star was dipping towards the horizon.*

*'Not long now for you, then,' Hassar said, nodding towards the impending sunset. 'Baras will be doomed to wait another day, though.'*

*'A week with nothing?' Baras replied. 'No major attack? Not even any further raids? The Imperium's reavers* were *here, so where did they go? How does that not worry you?'*

*'If I was meant to worry about such things, I'd have been born a general,' Hassar drawled, spitting a wad of purplish saliva over the rampart of the five hundred metre-high wall. 'We stand on the wall and shoot anything that's not meant to come near us. What more do you want?'*

*Ussuril knew Hassar was lying. He'd known the man since they were infants, after all. Hassar professed indifference, but he was on edge: he only chewed burril when he wanted to calm his nerves. In truth, Ussuril was on edge too. He hated baking in his combat rig when the sun's rays fell on him, but he hated the feeling it gave him of being exposed under the sky even more, as though he were lit up for an enemy whom he couldn't see, didn't know and didn't understand. There was a pressure in his head that usually meant a storm was coming, but the seasonal rains weren't due yet. He desperately wanted something to shoot at: something he could see, that he could fight.*

*The sun gradually dipped below the horizon, and the temperature dropped from uncomfortable down into something more tolerable. Dusk stretched across the sky from the far horizon, chasing the sun as it fled from this face of the planet, and the lights of Tesstra Prime blinked on to banish the*

*darkness. Ussuril should have felt more comfortable, yet despite the fact he was no longer sweating, his guts were tying tighter and tighter. He felt he could see right up into the void above; and, importantly, that something up there could see* down*, directly onto him.*

*'So when do–' Baras began.*

*She never finished her sentence, for it was lost in a series of hollow booms from behind them.*

*As one, Ussuril's garrison rushed to the rear edge of the ramparts. In front of them lay the yawning abyss of the Kavenan Gulf, the half-kilometre-wide trench dug centuries ago to further foil any adversary that made it over or through the wall, and layered with mines and other, more esoteric traps. The Seventh Bridge, the bridge that spanned the gulf and connected their barracks to the main body of the city, was smoking at either end of its great span.*

*Then, as Ussuril watched with horrified eyes, the great causeway dropped into the gulf. Detonations flashed up as its impact set off the ancient traps that had lain beneath it.*

*'Sabotage!' Hassar yelled, pointing at the smoke clouds – the telltale remnants of explosive charges. 'Sarge, sabotage! The bridge is down!'*

*'We're cut off!' Baras shouted, running back to the wall's exterior and unslinging her carbine as though expecting attackers to come boiling over the top at any moment. 'They're coming! They're coming here!'*

*'Seventh Squad, back to the wall!' bawled Birth-Sergeant Herfa, and Seventh obeyed him mechanically, their indoctrinated obedience overriding even their fear and alarm. 'The rest of you…' the sergeant added, then trailed off and licked his lips nervously. Ussuril stared at him. His officer wasn't certain what to do. How could an officer not know what to do?*

*More explosions flared in the darkness, accompanied by more cracks and booms, disconnected from the lights that birthed them by the distance the sound waves had to travel. Secondary explosions flashed, and their discharges rang out as well, as other bridges began to fall and also triggered the mines in the depths.*

*'Third… Fifth… Eighth…' Ussuril muttered, his eyes tracking the locations and linking them to where he knew those structures to be.*

*'By all the gods,' Hassar breathed. 'They're coming* everywhere*.'*

*'No,' Ussuril said, feeling cold fear grip his stomach. Fear, and the*

*beginnings of despair. ‘They’re not coming anywhere.’*

*He pointed towards the glittering bulk of Tesstra Prime, the city from which they were now isolated, barring a long trek around the wall in search of a bridge that had not been destroyed. Whole chunks of the city were winking out and going dark. Power failures were not unheard of, of course, but at this exact moment?*

*‘They’re already here.’*

‘Your tactics to take Tesstra Prime were elaborate, to say the least,’ states the third questioner.

‘Over-elaborate, in the opinion of Lord Guilliman,’ the first adds.

‘And yet we have already seen that they were effective,’ the primarch of the XX Legion points out.

‘Their effectiveness is not what we are questioning,’ the third questioner says, ‘merely their efficiency. The Legiones Astartes are the mightiest force under arms in the galaxy. Why resort to such an elaborate method of attack, with many interlinking parts that must all function as planned in order to achieve their goals? Surely your Legion could have taken the city in a far more direct manner, one which had more capacity for redundancy and options for adaption should the defence prove sterner than anticipated, or if there were other unforeseen factors such as those relating to inaccurate intelligence?’

‘It could have been done,’ the primarch agrees. ‘I could use my Legion as my brothers do, and rely on their abilities as supreme warriors to carry the day. Roboute’s meandering in the outer reaches of the Conservation demonstrated that. But that is my brother’s weakness – he prides himself as an expert tactician, but how much of that is based on the tools with which he works? A legionary is amongst the finest warriors in the galaxy–’

‘Amongst?’ the first questioner interjects.

‘Amongst,’ the primarch says, and there is the hint of a smile in his voice, although his face cannot be seen. ‘My father’s Custodes are, individually, the equal of almost any legionary and the superior of most.’

‘The Legio Custodes do not fight as one,’ the third questioner states. ‘They lack the mindset for it.’

‘Mindsets can change,’ the primarch points out. ‘The processes that give these warriors their abilities cannot. Or so we have been told,’ he adds, with

a glance at the first questioner. ‘My point is that it is easy for Roboute to proclaim himself a mighty general when his troops obey his orders quickly, without question, and are singularly capable in all aspects of open warfare. He thinks that off the back of this fact, he can forge a legacy that will endure – that he can set down a method which any commander can follow and achieve the same results as he has. *But he has not been tested against a superior adversary.’*

The primarch sighs, as if regretful.

‘One day, Roboute may face an enemy that will not engage him in the manner of warfare that he knows. His Ultramarines, the pale imitations of him that they are, may find themselves without his guidance, or find that what guidance he has left them is insufficient for the task. What will they do then, when the dogma they clasp so close to their hearts has failed them? When the commands do not come, or, perhaps more worryingly, their commander cannot be trusted? Will their spirit break? Perhaps, and perhaps not, but will they *adapt*? Of that, I am more doubtful. They will need to learn new warfare from first principles, and while they attempt that, they will be cut to ribbons.’

The primarch leans forward slightly, and the eye-lenses of his helm appear to focus on the third questioner.

‘My Legion will not be caught thusly. My Legion is already proficient in any number of ways of making war, both overt and covert, and we maintain this proficiency by using all these tools as often as we may. We are not a swordsman who has mastered a single thrust. We hold mastery over many strokes, all of us do, so that the enemy will not know which is the killing blow.’

*The blaring alarms woke Birth-General Juran Kodavron from sleep, and she rolled out of bed with attention-enhancing stimulants already coursing through her system. She grimaced and spat, ridding herself of the excess saliva that the initial dump always generated, and made a grab for her uniform. She’d made sure there was always one within arm’s reach for when she woke, ever since the Imperium had begun its aggression in the outer planets. Her face was well known, but there could still be a split-second delay in someone obeying her orders without the direct visual cue of her rank colours, and even a split-second delay could be crucial further*

*down the command line.*

*‘Tactical!’ she called, as she hauled her dress shirt on. Her left eye, replaced shortly after birth with a command prosthetic that had been enlarged and updated as she’d grown, immediately flashed up an overlay on her view of the room, a nebulous web of light depicting the geographical parameters of identified enemy action thus far. Her heart sank when she recognised the outline of the entire city. The full assault they’d been expecting, which they’d prepared for, which they’d garrisoned and fortified their walls against, had arrived with no explanation for the delay between the first raiding strikes and this offensive. There had been no communication, no threats, no demands for surrender with the raids used as examples of what would happen if that surrender was not given. War had simply arrived, unannounced by anything except its own first tendrils.*

*What was more, she realised a moment later, the flashing icons signifying confirmed or suspected enemy activity were all inside the walls, and yet the walls themselves were untouched. There had been no frontal assault, no strike of overwhelming force that had pierced the first line of their defences. The troops there were still at full strength.*

*The enemy was within the city, as though the walls had presented them with no obstacle whatsoever.*

*Kodavron suppressed the shiver that ran through her at that realisation, and forced herself to think clearly. She was one of the finest military minds in the entire Conservation, descended from generations of commanders, and she would not be undone by even such an adverse situation as this. This was her home, by all the gods, and the Imperium’s savages would not desecrate it in such a manner without feeling her wrath.*

*‘Give me all confirmed instances of enemy activity,’ she ordered, and the majority of the icons winked out, leaving a mere handful. These, then, were the locations where hostiles had been sighted, not just where damage had been caused. ‘Evidence,’ she commanded, strapping on her gun belt.*

*Pict-feeds began playing in her vision, footage from security surveillance devices, each linked to a location. She simultaneously heard, through the aural implant in her right ear, the panicked distress messages that had been broadcast by power grid engineers, by medical personnel, by the staff of communications relay stations.*

*Words and pictures married up to paint a grim, although not unexpected*

*picture: the heavily armoured, transhuman shock troops of the Imperium. The Conservation practised gene-smithing, of course, to better engineer its citizens for their roles in life, but even their enhanced ogryns, their best infantry, lacked the sheer amount of alterations that appeared to have been made to the Imperium's reavers. Few had been captured, and none alive, but they were barely recognisable as human any longer. It wasn't just the size – some of the Conservation's castes matched that, such as the heavy labourers, or the Birthguard – it was the bizarre biological alterations they'd received, such as a second heart, the strange black exoskin and, if reports from the front lines were to be believed, oral venom sacs. How could the Imperium even presume to speak for humanity, when these were its emissaries? And how had they got here, these giants? How had they infiltrated the most heavily defended city in the entire Conservation?*

*In some respects, it didn't matter. They were here, and they were engaging targets, and they would be dealt with. The details of their arrival would have to be pursued at a later date.*

*'Include suspected enemy activity,' Kodavron ordered, as she headed for her chamber door, and her display updated again. There was a new icon now: another probable attack in the time since she'd last looked at the full picture. The enemy were all across the city, and were striking at targets designed to maximise confusion, but they seemed to be few in number. Kodavron would have placed money on many of the attacks being pre-planned sabotage, not outright assaults, and time-coordinated to give the impression of a much larger force working in unison.*

*The Imperium's transhumans were fearsome warriors, the Conservation had already learned that, and when deployed en masse there was little that could be done to halt their advance. Here, though, a small number deep in hostile territory…*

*They hadn't compromised the palace. She palmed open her chamber door and stepped out into the corridor, and her two towering Birthguard took up position on either side of her, their faces hidden by the mirrored helms that made them even more impersonal and menacing to would-be assassins. The enemy had struck all across the city, but they hadn't been able to penetrate the Palace of Radiance where she, the other high-ranking officers, and the birth-supremes all resided, and where the ogryn reserves were barracked.*

*Her communicator beeped, and a moment later the smoothly modulated*

*voice of Supreme Do'Hetta spoke into her ear.*

'Juran, what in the name of the gods is happening?'

*It was the first time Kodavron had heard one of the supremes sound even the slightest bit concerned, for all that the ability to express emotion had been practically bred out of them. They were ethereal, untouchable, immune from the petty worries and stresses of those they ruled – or at least, that was the impression they gave. Kodavron, somewhat closer to the reality of things than Prime's masses, knew full well that the supremes were in no way as permanently calm as they appeared; they just had the galaxy's best gambling faces. Normally it would have amused her to hear even the faintest tremble in a supreme's voice, but given the circumstances…*

*'We're under attack, supreme,' she replied, doing her best to sound respectful despite the fact her ruler really should have been able to work it out for himself. 'My initial analysis suggests a small group of the so-called Imperium's transhuman soldiers.'*

'And what action are you taking?'

*'They've tried to isolate the wall garrisons from the rest of the city,' Kodavron said, rechecking her display. 'They've taken out most of the bridges, but not all. Perhaps those charges failed, perhaps their operatives were engaged and killed – it doesn't matter. If we pull the garrisons back and swamp the city, we can tighten a net inwards and crush them against the palace. Scramble the fighters to prevent any chance of an aerial evacuation, and we'll have them.'*

'You want to force them *closer* to us?'

*'The palace is impregnable, your highness,' Kodavron reminded him. 'They can either engage our troops in the streets, when we have overwhelming numerical superiority, or flee before them and make a last stand outside these walls. Either way, we'll have them, and we can send a message to the Imperium about what happens when they strike at our heart.'*

'I want the Birthguard doubled,' *Do'Hetta demanded.* 'Doubled on all supremes!'

*'By your will, your highness,' Kodavron said, stifling a sigh. She cut the connection, opened a new one to Birthguard command, and spoke the code words to signify enemy activity and an increased guard presence on all priority personnel. 'Blue Sky Rising.'*

‘Dawn Approaches,’ *came the response. Within moments, the huge forms of additional Birthguard would be on their way to every supreme and high-ranking military official within the palace.*

*Kodavron’s quarters were not far from the war room, and she reached it within ninety seconds of leaving her chambers. The door hissed open at her touch, and she stepped inside with her Birthguard at her shoulders. She was greeted by a maelstrom of shouting and near-panic.*

*‘General!’ gasped Birth-Captain Gurran, snapping into a salute. Behind him, the room quietened somewhat, and Kodavron saw faces flicker with the beginnings of hope. General Juran Kodavron would know what to do.*

*Now she just had to live up to that trust.*

*‘What are you all looking at me for?’ she snapped. ‘We’re under attack, back to your stations! Captain, I want a full tactical display up immediately – this,’ she tapped her optical prosthetic, ‘can only give me so much detail. Give me your full analysis of the situation as you understand it, in the next twenty seconds, starting now.’*

*Gurran saluted again, and began speaking. He was solid and dependable, and had already taken steps to secure further priority targets from attack, but he didn’t have the tactical vision to bring the fight to the enemy. Kodavron stepped into the breach.*

*‘The remaining bridges have been secured?’ she queried.*

*‘As tightly as we can, general,’ Gurran responded. ‘Heavy guard on them all, we’re inspecting to make sure there are no hidden demolition charges that have yet to detonate.’*

*‘Good,’ Kodavron nodded. ‘I want our troops pulled back from the walls, each garrison to use the nearest functional bridge, leaving ten per cent strength in place. They’re to perform a sweep-and-clear operation throughout the entire city, closing in on the palace.’*

*‘Ma’am?’ Gurran blurted, surprise overcoming his training.*

*‘The* entire *city, captain!’ Kodavron snapped. ‘I don’t care how big the place is, there are enough of them to do it! I don’t want a single building left unaccounted for – we are going to find these savages, and one way or another, we are going to kill them.’*

*‘Yes, general,’ Gurran replied. Kodavron listened to the orders being relayed through to the wall garrisons, and allowed herself a faint smile. The enemy had been aggressive, and efficient, but an element of their plan had*

*failed. There were still some bridges left for Prime's troops to withdraw along, and then crush the saboteurs.*

*The* ping *of the war room's door drew her attention, and she looked around to see two Birthguard entering. Of course; the order to double the guard on all priority personnel included herself. Her two towering shadows turned to greet the newcomers as the door hissed shut again behind them.*

*'Blue Sky Rising,' one of the two new arrivals said.*

*'Sunset Falls,' came the reply.*

*Kodavron blinked. That wasn't the correct–*

*Gunshots. A blaze of rounds filled the air as three of the Birthguard whipped their weapons up and filled the interior of the war room with violence and death. Kodavron saw the communication relay explode in a shower of sparks and twisted metal, then officer after officer get cut down by sawing arcs of fire. The Birthguard were armed with the most devastating personal firearms possessed by the Conservation, and the human form offered no resistance to them.*

*Kodavron scrabbled for her gun, but the last Birthguard was already reaching for her, and his massive arms trapped hers to her sides in a grip of steel. She struggled against his grip, and her shock at the betrayal slowed her reactions just enough for him to reach up and rip out her personal communicator implant before she could call for aid. Kodavron screamed as it tore loose from the flesh of her ear and the bone of her skull.*

*The Birthguards' guns fell silent. Three seconds after the violence had begun, it was over. Twenty officers of the Conservation lay dead. A handful had managed to draw a sidearm, but none of them had succeeded in getting a shot away.*

*'Our thanks for your assistance, general,' a deep voice said. It was the one who had hold of her. 'You saved us the trouble of having to fake the order to withdraw from the walls.' Even through her panic and rage, Juran Kodavron picked up the hints of wrongness in the accent. It spoke her language, but not with the cadences of Tesstra.*

*'Who are you?' she demanded, although she feared she knew the answer. But how could they have infiltrated the Birthguard? From where had they gained the armoured bodygloves and mirrored helms? And yet, now she looked at them anew, she saw the slight stretching and rumpling in the material that suggested they had been tailored for subtly different frames, if*

*equally massive ones. Were their true owners already dead?*

*The answer to her spoken question, when it came, meant nothing to her.*

*‘I am Alpharius.’*

*There was a sudden, brief pain in Juran Kodavron’s neck as the world spun, and then everything rapidly faded to black.*

‘You were the last of your brothers to be found by the Emperor,’ the first questioner says. ‘By the time you were reunited with your Legion, your brother primarchs were already recognised and decorated generals, with many conquests to their names.’

‘This is true,’ the primarch agrees with a nod.

‘Could it be,’ the first questioner continues, leaning forwards in their seat, ‘that your attachment to highly complex, multifaceted warfare is just an attempt to outdo your siblings? That since you are unable to match their battle records, due to the shorter time you have been with your Legion, you seek to prove yourself as their superior in the methodology you use? Is this not down to tactical doctrine, but your own ego?’

‘After all,’ adds the second questioner, ‘the Ultramarines and Lord Guilliman have achieved remarkable results in their service to the Emperor. It would be understandable if you felt intimidated by the comparison – if you wished to avoid being seen as an afterthought, the last amongst equals.’

The primarch hesitates, as though considering. Then he too leans forward, steepling the fingers of his armoured gauntlets as he rests his elbows on his knees.

‘What “remarkable results” have the Ultramarines achieved?’

‘The number of worlds they have brought into Compliance is–’

‘Is misleading.’

There is a moment’s silence.

‘The Ultramarines have achieved nothing remarkable,’ the primarch states. ‘They have achieved the same thing, in the same way, again, and again, and again. They are highly skilled at it, but they do not *test* themselves. They fulfil the role for which they were created by the Emperor, and they never strive to move beyond it. Guilliman is the same as the others – they either fail to recognise their own weaknesses, or they assume that one of the rest of us can be called upon to fill the gap.’

‘Assuming what you say is true,’ the third questioner speaks up, ‘why

should your brothers not feel this way?'

'Because it will not always be true,' the primarch says baldly. 'Our father created us, but quite clearly His creations are neither perfect, nor indispensable to Him. There were twenty Legions, once, and two more primarchs than those that bestride the galaxy today, clad in the panoply of war. For all that my brothers invoke memories of the myths of demigods in the minds of the mortals, for all that we are far beyond human, there have been two occasions when flawed tools were discarded. Who is to say the same thing may not happen again?'

If silence can have a flavour, the one that now fills the chamber tastes of shock.

'When my father found me, there was no sense of the last member of a family being brought home,' the primarch continues. 'Not as I have heard the notion of family described by mortals. There was a sense of… satisfaction. Of completeness. Of the final piece of a puzzle being located and slotted into place. I did not spend long with my father – not long compared to some of my brothers, who were by His side for decades, and shared with Him the apparent joy of each new sibling's recovery. However, in my time with Him I learned what many of my brothers seem to have missed – that we are my father's tools. My brothers conquer worlds and bring them into Compliance, and they think that is all that is required of them.'

'You are saying that it is not?' the first questioner asks.

'The Great Crusade is about more than just reuniting humanity,' the primarch says. 'That is a purpose, but it is not *the* purpose. My father has created these tools, and now He tests them, and the crusade is the best arena for that test. He will test us to destruction, if He needs to – for some of us, He already has. My father's vision goes beyond the crusade. He knows what must come next, but He does not share that with us. He already knows what the Ultramarines can do – will they prove it to any greater extent by conquering another hundred worlds in the same manner? No.

'That is why we fight as we do. That is why we make the preparations we make, why we have seeded the galaxy with our agents – why we recruit as we do, and train as we do. We do not know what the future holds, and the time may come when we are all there is – when there are no Iron Warriors to break the enemy down, no Raven Guard to strike from the shadows, no

Ultramarines to conduct the perfect military campaign. If that happens, we must be ready for *any* role required of us. We are the Emperor's ultimate fail-safe, and we must prove to Him that this is the case.'

'So your dislike of Lord Guilliman plays no part at all?' the first questioner asks, with a hint of mocking laughter in their voice.

'I neither resent nor hate Roboute,' the primarch replies. 'I pity him. Whether the change happens gradually or suddenly, one day he and his genius will be obsolete, and all his plans will be nothing but memories. I fear he lacks the flexibility to cope with that. I will not make that mistake. I will evolve. I will always do whatever is necessary, and so will my Legion.'

*Tesstra Prime had burned.*

*The city had been gutted by explosions. Whole garrisons of Tesstran troops had been ordered to withdraw from the walls by their superiors, only to find themselves bottlenecked in the few remaining routes and then massacred when the true attack came. The walls themselves had been breached in innumerable places by convoys of super-heavy war machines that cut through the city like a finely honed blade. Most of the command structure was dead, assassinated by their own bodyguards.*

*But Prime still fought.*

*The Imperium's reavers had not pressed home their advantage. Either overconfident or lazy, they had not rooted out all those capable of resisting them. Companies of gene-enhanced ogryns, the Conservation's only troops that had so far been able to stand up to the reavers, were now ready to launch their counterstrike. In order for the attack to have any hope of successfully freeing the city, it had to move as one and hit the enemy in complete synchronicity.*

*Birth-Captain Simmun watched the chrono tick downwards inside the armoured transport from which he would be coordinating his company.*

*'Mark!' called his adjutant, a scar-faced fellow by the name of Trav.*

*'Advance!' Simmun barked into his communicator. In front of them, the garrison doors began to rise. All across Prime, eighteen other disguised doors would be doing exactly the same thing, as Prime's last, hidden reserves issued forwards to take their city back. Each company of ogryns would be commanded by a captain, whose job it was to direct their forces against the enemy, for the immense size, bulk and hardiness of their troops*

*was not matched by their intellect.*

*Light filtered in, and the garrison poured out. They moved fast, faster than most humans could run, and with a purpose and precision that belied their size. It was the beautiful thing about his charges, Simmun thought: give them a simple task, and they would pursue it with relentless efficiency. 'Climb that mountain', 'stand here for a day', or 'fight here until you are killed' were all instructions that their minds could cope with, and which they would latch onto and complete. 'Take back the city' was too complex; for that they needed a greater mind. Those greater minds, such as Simmun's, were protected within armoured transports, that in turn drove between the walls of gene-bulked muscle on all sides. For the enemy to get to him, they would have to go through all his troops anyway.*

*'Encountering light resistance from the left flank,' Trav reported. 'Isolated sniper fire.'*

*'Range and vector?' Simmun demanded, looking at the tactical display. Within moments, their instruments' best estimates of the snipers' locations flashed up. 'Send Fourth Squad to flush them out, and send a message to Captain Ruven, they may flee towards her.'*

*'Acknowledged,' came the reply, and a unit of twenty ogryns peeled off to go hunting.*

*Less than a minute later, the main column encountered its first true resistance.*

*'Barricade ahead,' Trav said, manipulating the controls so the transport's imagers displayed what they were capturing directly onto the tactical readout.*

*'Defended?' Simmun demanded.*

*Flashes of light appeared on the image: muzzle flare.*

*'Defended,' Trav replied with a faint grin, which then disappeared as he frowned at another readout. 'I'm only getting heat signatures from the weapons, nothing from the firers. They must have found a way to mask themselves… There are only a few readings, but there could be many more there who just aren't shooting yet, for whatever reason.'*

*Simmun shrugged. 'Let's find out. Signal the troops to punch through, but be ready for some quick manoeuvring if this is a trap.'*

*'Sir,' Trav acknowledged.*

*Simmun's communicator pinged, a command priority alert, and he opened*

*the channel. ‘Captain Simmun.’*

‘Overlord. Crater. Longing. Sky. Vestibule. Rivet.’

*Simmun stiffened. Anyone watching his face would have seen his pupils dilate, and a faint sheen of sweat appear on his brow. He unbuttoned the holster of his sidearm: a tiny movement, even in the confines of the vehicle, and one that went unnoticed by Trav, or any of the crew.*

*‘Confirmation?’ he croaked.*

‘Midnight,’ *intoned the deep voice in his ear.*

*No one below the rank of colonel knew that the entire Conservation’s officer corps had been hypno-conditioned to respond to certain key phrases. No one below the rank of general knew what those phrases were. So Captain Simmun didn’t know why he’d asked for confirmation, or what anything that had just been said actually meant. Nor did he know why he’d drawn his sidearm. He only realised that he’d done so when the cold metal of the barrel was placed against his temple by his own hand, and the faint voice screaming in the back of his head that* this was wrong, this was wrong *was drowned out by the white noise that sluiced through his brain, carrying all his thoughts away with it, and leaving only impulses in its wake.*

*Captain Simmun pulled the trigger at the exact same time as the Alpha Legion sprang their trap, and dozens of bolters opened up on all sides of his column. The ogryns faltered, their existing orders to advance and engage the enemy in front of them warring with their deep-seated instincts to fight back at those now attacking them from their flanks. They died in droves: mighty warriors without the wit to think for themselves, and left stranded with no guidance to turn to.*

The first questioner looks at their two companions. Their two companions look back.

‘I feel that the Council of Truth is satisfied,’ the second questioner states.

‘I concur,’ says the third questioner.

‘As do I,’ agrees the first questioner. ‘The truth has been examined, and the account given of it suffices. The subject’s statements hold merit.’

‘Then the council is concluded,’ the second questioner says. All four rise, including the primarch, and bow from the neck: a sign of respect amongst equals, for in these circumstances the Alpha Legion makes no differentiation between legionnaire and primarch, or even between primarch

and human agent. Then the second and the third questioner leave, walking between the benches to the chamber's exit, but the first remains, holding the primarch in silent regard. The primarch stands and returns the gaze, two helms staring at each other, one ornate and one plain.

Alpharius reaches up and removes his helm. 'Well spoken, brother.'

Omegon also reaches up, and removes the crested helm of the Alpha Legion's primarch. A sly smile crosses his face: a face that is identical in every regard to the one that has just addressed him.

'You are too kind, brother. And may I thank you in turn, for your excellent final question? It made me think before I answered.'

'What is the purpose of a Council of Truth, except to examine our own assumptions?' Alpharius asks, with a smile the mirror image of his twin's. 'But I believe your answers did indeed satisfy our fellows who were also present.'

'That is good,' Omegon says. 'It would not do for the Legion to harbour doubts about our methods. In that much, at least, we are as vulnerable as Guilliman's dogma-loving Thirteenth.'

'No force is perfect,' Alpharius replies.

'Not all of our brothers would agree with that sentiment,' Omegon reminds him.

'I won't repeat it to them,' Alpharius says, with a serpent's smile. He pauses for a moment.

'Your answers… they were good. But were they true?'

Omegon replaces the crested helm upon his head.

'They were as true as they needed to be. To achieve what must be done.'

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# TERMINUS

Chris Wraight

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Caipha Morarg knelt, his knees sinking into Terra’s dark earth. His fists hit the soil. He vomited.

He was wearing his helm, the old Mk II one, and it filled up quickly. Once, that wouldn’t have been a problem. The filters would have snapped open, keeping his airways clear and siphoning it all off. But now the filters were clogged, and he felt his nostrils and mouth fill up, and his eyes blur with mucus and acid.

He gasped for air, and reached for the seal at his neck. It wouldn’t open. The catch had rusted shut three days ago and he hadn’t been able to prise it clear since.

He should have been drowning by then, but he wasn’t. He should have been gagging uncontrollably, but the reflex stopped firing. He swallowed. He opened his eyes. He felt lumpy matter swill around him, and somehow he didn’t need to breathe, or swallow, or see.

He calmed down. A kind of vision returned to him, clouded now in green.

He saw his own hands claw through the mulch below him. He saw the dust of Terra, turned black by munitions and chem run-off, flaking over the finger-plates of his gauntlet.

A boot intruded on the picture. Morarg looked up, and blearily saw Zadal Crosius standing over him. The Apothecary cumbersomely got down on his knees alongside him.

‘What ails you, brother?’ he asked.

Morarg laughed, coughing up more bile. ‘What does not?’

Crosius didn’t laugh. It was probably harder on him, all of this. The Apothecaries of the Death Guard had been renowned, back at the start. They had presided over the warriors that could absorb all poisons, carry on fighting even when the tox-clouds rolled across the trenches. They had been skilled with their own poisons, too – the ones that cured, that invaded the bloodstream and did battle at the cellular level. Now, what was left for them? They would have to find something else to do to justify a place in the Legion. There were no cures left, not when everything, absolutely everything, was a sickness.

Morarg shifted painfully onto his side, reclining into the thick mud. It was good, for just a moment, to let his aching joints rest.

‘How can I be purging again?’ he asked, sourly. ‘Haven’t eaten for days.’

None of them had. The stores on all the warships were rotten. None of them seemed to need to eat. Surely they would have to, at some stage.

Crosius took out a wrench, reached for a tap-valve at Morarg’s throat, and managed to twist it open. The vomitus drained away, staining an already filthy breastplate with another stripe of brown-grey.

‘You’re still asking questions,’ Crosius said. ‘That’s good. Not many still ask questions.’

‘Maybe they’re wise.’

Crosius scanned him with a blotch-lensed auspex. ‘I dislike the lassitude. It’s worse than everything else. We were never incurious.’

He rose. Morarg managed to get to his feet, too, somewhat awkwardly. The servos down the right-hand side of his armour were jammed, meaning he had to haul the weight of his armour using his body. That made him much slower than he had been, but then again his body was changing too, and who knew where that process would end up? Maybe his speed would return. Or maybe it would be traded for something more useful. He reached

for his blade – a gladius with a blunted edge, glistening with a film of chems. The taste of his own stomach acid fizzed on his chapped lips.

Ahead of him ran the trench-plains, the mass of interlocked kill-zones created by the defenders of the Throneworld. The landscape was drear, clouded by fogs, pocked with ruined guntowers and wrecked war machines. The walls of the Palace itself could be glimpsed as a high grey screen in the far distance. They looked like a continental shelf, or a geological fault. They were still a long, long way off.

All around him, stretching out in a ragged line, other Death Guard were advancing, grey shadows in the fog, trudging slowly, one step at a time. The march was eerily quiet – the suck of boots in the muck, the wheeze of respiratory systems, the grind of corroded armour-joints. Every so often a weapon would discharge with a flare of plasma or a swoosh of phosphex. Rigid taxonomies were breaking down, and warriors used what they felt like using. Some of those guns had bulbous new additions, pulsing like lung-sacs. Some looked ready to fall apart.

Ahead of them was an isolated defence tower, thrusting out of the toxin-swamp like the prow of a ship, blackened by repeated impacts but still operational. The sector defenders had fallen back there – the remnants of three or four broken infantry battalions from overrun trench systems. The place really should be levelled, though the prospect filled Morarg with weariness. He could just sink into the mud. Rest for a while.

Crosius was already moving, though, hoisting a snub-nosed cannon of some kind onto his shoulder, where it nestled amid decaying needle-thickets and extractor-nests.

‘Work to do, brother,’ the Apothecary said.

Morarg followed him.

‘As always,’ he said, sourly.

It was hard to remember how it had all happened. Morarg had no idea how long they had been stranded in the warp before breaking into attack range of Terra. It could have been a lifetime. It might have been longer.

Everything was a struggle to pin down. He felt strangely ancient, and yet the change had happened just before the fleet had crashed back into realspace. In truth he was still all new, remade, fresh christened at the font of decay.

Only snatches and fragments of the transformation remained. He could remember a long period where he had been lucid, crouched against the floor of a long snaking corridor aboard the *Terminus Est*, watching the flies boil out of the broken atmosphere-seals. He had tried to crawl away from them, clunking heavily down the passage with his armour denting the floor panels. They had got in despite that, squirming and flocking, filling his air-intakes, wriggling against his flesh. He had screamed, and they had poured down his throat, making him gag and gag again.

How had that struggle ended? He didn't remember. He didn't even know if it had happened just like that. There had been many bad dreams, crazy dreams, locked in those narrow tubes and gantries, strung out for hours, days, months, years. The ships had all been like tombs, hanging immobile in the warp, their protective canopies compromised, their innards ringing with screams, or dreams of them, or visions of dreams.

Now he looked up again. The defence tower was within shot range, but he didn't take up a gun. He still had his blade in his hand, and that would do. He could see targets, greasy blurs on his inner visor scanner – a collection of ragged Imperial squads, cut off by the previous offensive, trying to get back to the tower. They were on foot, jogging and limping. Morarg saw that they wore a mix of uniforms and armour plates. Some were well armed, hauling heavy weapons that were still functioning properly. Others looked little more than beggars. These were the remnants of older actions, the scraps left over from greater offensives. Every horizon was alight with furious conflicts, making the earth tremble and buck, but here, in this place, it was half-empty, the haunt of the slow and the out-of-place, a mist-shrouded hinterland of dreamlike residues. They would have to march for a long time before they encountered the infernos of combat they had been promised.

Crosius had gone ahead of him. He saw the Apothecary fire his shoulder-mounted cannon. A puff of brown-green swirled out, and a shell of some sort smacked right into the middle of the retreating band of defenders. It exploded with a wet slap, splattering a dozen of them with a luminous film. They all started shrieking at once, clawing at their helms. A few others, further out from the blast radius, turned to fire back, sending streams of las-fire and solid rounds into Crosius. The Apothecary just soaked it all up, still lumbering studiously, getting ready to fire again.

Even before the change, Crosius would not have been seriously inconvenienced by such warriors, but he would have at least made some attempt to evade the shots, or to respond to them with a greater level of aggression. He would have charged at them, perhaps, getting into blade range without the need to waste a shell. Now he just walked as if in a daze, cloaked in his new absorbent skin of mottled ceramite-and-flesh.

'Can we still feel it?' Morarg asked himself, looking down at his own grime-encrusted hands. 'Can I still stir my blood?'

Then he looked up at the tower. It was a solid thing, an ugly thing, built of rockcrete blocks around a metal core. Las-fire spat from its upper parapet in concentrations that might conceivably do some damage. A few hundred defenders had made it there. The wretches fleeing from Crosius might add to their number if they weren't cut down in the open. They must have known they were all going to die in that place, cut off from the main retreat, isolated out in the wastes.

Were they despairing yet? Were they ready to make their own pacts with whatever powers they believed in, to stave off annihilation?

That thought made him strangely angry. But that was good. He started to swing the blade around him, lubricating the joints of his armour, trying to get some feeling back.

The tower loomed ahead. The Death Guard were closing in now, advancing slowly in ones and twos, no tactical formations, coming from all directions.

'Get ready,' Morarg grunted, swinging the blade. 'Get ready.'

Afterwards, he and Crosius sat in what had been a watch-station right at the summit of the defence tower. The windows were all smashed, the instruments destroyed. They sat next to one another with their backs against the wall. Crosius had taken an instrument from his backpack – something thin and spidery – and was turning it over and over in his palm. Morarg had laid his blade on his knees. It was coated in fresh blood now, much of which ran in sticky rivulets down his armour.

A head, newly relieved of its accompanying body, faced them. It was a human female's, still with the helmet on, grimy cheeks visible under a smeared visor. Beyond that were other body parts, some half-encased in armour plates, some like sides of rotting meat. It already smelled bad.

Morarg looked at the head.

‘When did you last see him?’ he asked.

‘Who?’ said Crosius.

‘The primarch.’

The Apothecary thought for a moment. ‘A long time ago.’

Morarg’s own last memory of Mortarion was on the bridge of the *Endurance*, a few days back. The primarch had been slumped in his command throne, surrounded by a fog of chemical gases so thick that his outline was almost entirely obscured. Morarg had seen those great new wings, though, like webs of dirty gauze, spread up and out, bent under the throne canopy.

‘He made the choice,’ Morarg said, morosely.

‘That is his burden.’

‘So where were you, when you realised?’

‘Realised?’

‘That he had made it. For all of us.’

Crosius thought about it. The needles in the device made a snicking sound as something retracted, and that briefly distracted him. ‘I don’t remember. The *Terminus Est*? I think so. We all went over, didn’t we? When Typhon–’

‘Don’t say his name.’

‘Calas. Is that better? When he… I was there, I think. It smelled different, even before.’ Crosius’ head angled back slowly, coming to rest against the rockcrete. ‘I saw the primarch, there, in the middle of it all, from a distance. He was coming up from the lower decks. I was sick. We were all sick. I couldn’t do anything for myself, couldn’t do anything for anyone else. I followed him, I wanted to talk. I thought maybe I might be able to… but it was all gone, by then.’

‘He wouldn’t have wanted anything from you.’

‘No, but I wasn’t thinking. None of us were.’ Crosius exhaled, and a fine grey mist slid out of his helm grille. ‘I caught his face, for a moment, though the lights were going on and off. So I saw him in bits. In snatches. At times, it seemed he was laughing. At times, screaming. I called out. I said this was a warp trick. We needed to dig deeper. Would he issue a command? Would he tell me what to do? I would do anything. We were all willing to die, if that was the command.’

Morarg listened. ‘What did he say?’

‘I don’t know if he heard me. There was this… howling. All the time. I think it might have been howling for weeks. You remember how it was. The howling, in the ships, that made you think your mind had gone.’

Morarg did not. The ship had never howled for him. Instead, it had been the flies, in his eyes, in his stomach, buzzing, biting.

‘But then he did see me, and I saw him, and he was already changing, and I knew then that he’d done something. It was the way he looked. Like nothing I’d ever seen before. He’d been angry. He’d been morose. Hells, I’d seen him in pain, just for a moment.’

Morarg looked at the head. It was beginning to tilt over in its pool of blood. ‘So what was it?’

‘I don’t know. It was like he’d just realised something. Something that had been wearing at him for years, and now he understood it. He wasn’t shocked. He wasn’t surprised.’ Crosius thought about it. ‘There was only one other time I saw an expression like that. Back during the Akasta Compliance. I was treating a battle-brother for a spinal injury, long-term, that had hampered his combat. He’d given himself thirty per cent increased load-drills, trying to punish it out. He’d only come to see me under orders. We found the problem. It wasn’t his spine. He’d taken shot-damage to the jacks under his carapace, so the problem was the armour. When I told him, I saw that same expression. Now he understood. Now he realised why all that effort hadn’t improved it. It never would have. All wasted effort, but now he could get it fixed.’ Crosius’ fingers returned to the needle-array, moving unconsciously. ‘He wasn’t happy. You couldn’t be happy, having done all that for nothing. So it wasn’t even relief. It was like…’

The Apothecary trailed off.

Morarg didn’t say anything for a while. Talking was harder work than it had been before. He got phlegm in the back of his throat, and he could never clear it.

‘I’ll ask you something now,’ he said at last. ‘I’ll ask you it once, and I’ll never ask it again.’

Crosius turned to face him, and listened.

‘Did he make the right decision?’

No reply came.

‘What I mean is,’ Morarg said, now the words were out, with more on the way, ‘that was what we lived for. No one endures more than we do. I don’t

even remember how long it lasted. It must have been a trick. Witchery. Could we have outlasted it?' He shook his head. 'Look at me. I don't know what kind of bargain he made. I'm not sure we came out on the right side of it.'

Crosius laughed. At least, it might have been a laugh. 'No? You never had much imagination, brother.' He held up the needle-array. 'I take hits now, and I barely feel them. I don't need to eat. I don't need to sleep. My mind works better. Before, I was a crass butcher. I'd take out progenoids, staple up bolt-wounds. Wasting my time. Now, though. Now, I have *ideas*.'

The Apothecary shuffled forward, stowing the array, and got to his feet. The whole process took three times as long as it once did, with every movement ponderous and effort-laden.

'You're right,' Crosius said. 'Never ask that again. You and me, we both knew him on Barbarus. We were both on that ship. He never gave an order that wasn't the right one. He is who he is.'

Then he lumbered off. As he went, his boot crushed the disembodied head, crunching the helm as if it were made of porcelain.

Morarg watched him go.

'Then why isn't he here?' he asked, out loud. 'Why are we on this world, when he is not?'

From the tower, the Death Guard went north, heading towards the first line of walls proper. No orders came in from the fleet in orbit. In the past, the orders would have been sent in advance, meticulously prepared, all eventualities covered. The ingress routes would all have been plotted, the milestones charted, responsibilities assigned. The Legion was not known for tactical flexibility, but it had always had a reputation for thoroughness.

Now, though, the ships in orbit were silent. Those warriors who had been landed made their own way, operating on only the vaguest instructions. They knew the destination, and they knew the likely levels of resistance, but everything in between was a blur.

It didn't matter. They marched like automata, getting used to the way their bodies functioned now, feeling the gravitational pull of this world that, for most of them, was alien territory.

Perhaps that was the idea. Let them discover themselves. Flex new muscles against slime and filth, before the true test – fighting once again

against Legiones Astartes.

Morarg trudged through the stink. He fought when he had to, which was only when some desperate band of defenders burst from the cover of bombed-out habs to try to take him down. The landscape around him had once been a cityscape, filled with inhabited spires the rival to anything in the wider Imperium. Now it was a horizontal land of rubble heaps and spike-ruins, overwatched by a bile-black sky and rocked by the constant rumble of munitions. The northern horizon took the place of a sun, and was constantly alight, making all shadows run southwards. Just occasionally, in the aftermath of some colossal flash, you could even see the profile of the Palace itself, monumental and unmoving, a leviathan splayed across the far arch of the world, yet to be approached, let alone breached.

The closer he got, the heavier his tread became. Morarg began to imagine a great dome of heat-wash, trembling ahead of him, pushing him back. It was as if something, or someone, knew just what had been done to them, what turgid presences now fizzed through their clotted veins, and repelled it all.

He never slept. Sleep was for another age, one in which his armour had come cleanly away from the plugs in his body. He dreamed, though – a waking reverie, with his eyes open. He saw the rulers of old Barbarus stalking ahead of him, milk-pale in the mists, grinning as they had once done when they were masters.

Throwing them down had been the great achievement. After they were killed, it had felt, briefly, as if there were no tyrants left, and no suffering, and only open skies.

And for that, you would follow him. You would ignore the tics, the preoccupations, the lapses. You knew that he had suffered too, thrown into a world that was not his own, and tortured, and made to doubt. You would see that he had retained the core of himself, and had triumphed. And, later, you would see that he received no credit for that from the empire he had become a part of. He was scorned, despite all he had done. And that scorn pulled the Legion together, and made them tight as a clenched gauntlet, so that every insult was remembered and nursed, and every scrap of strength was gathered and kept lean for the purpose of restoring the ledgers.

Morarg had no doubt that other Legions admired their primarchs. He had no doubt that they fought well for them, anxious to win praise or avoid

disgrace. But he knew this, too – that few loved their liege lord as they did. For an outsider to the Death Guard, they were a morose band of grime-streaked plodders, despised even by their allies. For an insider, they were merely as the universe had made them. They were hard steel, alloyed fast, tempered in the furnaces of disdain. The rust was only a surface illusion, or had been, something to hide their power and make an enemy underestimate them.

'Death Guard,' an outsider, an Ultramarine, had once said to Morarg during an uneasy joint campaign. 'I think, sometimes, that is an unhealthy name.'

Morarg had not attempted to justify it to him. If he had done so, he might have said that a son of Macragge could know nothing of death, not truly, being raised on worlds of preservation and order. If he had been surrounded by it from birth, made aware of it as a part of existence, as common as water or a heartbeat, he would understand. The Legion did not celebrate death, but nor did they guard against it, or try to hold it back. Even before the great change, they had held it in their arms, feeling its cold breath mingling with theirs, cloaking themselves in its white shadow.

He looked up then, roused from his thoughts. A few hundred metres away, another great bastion loomed out of the condensate, rearing high. Its crown was intact, studded with fixed cannons. Faint red lights blinked on and off across dark flanks. An aquila had been carved over its high lintel, as black as the stone around it.

Morarg paused. This place would not so easily be laid low. The Death Guard came to a halt, strung out thinly, tiny specks against the upcoming fortress.

He looked down at his blade. He held it up into the weak light, and saw the angry glow of the horizon-burn reflect against its cutting edge.

Except that the horizon was not the source of the light. The light was flooding down from up above, fiery, refracting and churning like water. The dust at his feet stirred, whipped up by suddenly churning air. The oily water sitting at the base of the blast craters chopped and slapped. From somewhere ahead – perhaps the bastion itself – a warning klaxon started to bray.

Morarg looked up. The racing clouds broke open. Shafts of pale illumination lanced through them, spearing down to the blackened earth. A

lander broke through, shadowed by hovering Stormbirds. It was huge, steaming and flame-flickered from its orbital passage, underpinned with an array of heavy thrusters that now blasted hard to arrest its descent.

Morarg lumbered backwards, slipping as he did so, trying to put as much distance as he could between himself and that thing. Lightning crackled around it as it came down, dancing across beaten-metal panels bearing the Death Guard sigil. Even as it came to touch down, he could see the deep-soaked damage across every part of it – the rust, the blown rivets, the cracks. None of that could have been caused by weapons. The lander was changing all by itself, just as they all were changing.

Eventually the fires coughed out, and the whole contraption smacked heavily to earth, its extended legs sinking a metre-deep into the mud. A gang-ramp extended and lowered. Pale gas vented, tumbling out of grilles and tube-mouths, cascading down a long shallow slope.

From the aperture, less than twenty metres from where Morarg stood, eight figures emerged. Seven of them were giants, their armour encrusted with filth so thick that it formed an ablative curtain all of its own. They carried reaper-blades, iron-bound heels clanging as they descended.

The eighth was the master, and he was colossal. He had grown obscenely, stretched, as if pulled by a god’s eager fingers, his bones cracking and his grey skin tearing. His face was hidden behind a rebreather, his eyes shadowed by a tattered cowl. His huge moth-wings unfurled as he emerged, too big to be missed, too flimsy to carry him aloft, surely. Were they affectations? Were they curses?

He came down the ramp, limping, supporting himself on the stave of his scythe. Morarg watched him come. All the Death Guard watched him come. They were silent. Some would not have laid eyes on him since the great change itself. Even Morarg, one of those who had been close to him in counsel for a long time, had not seen him properly since then, only through veils and shadows.

Now the primarch was out in the open again, lit by the weak sun of his birthworld. He looked too tall, too extended, a scarecrow in motley armour, held together by rotting strips of linen, or maybe sorcery, or maybe just his will.

Mortarion, Lord of Death, reached the end of the ramp. His cloven boots sank into the broken ground. As they touched it, the mud dried up, split

open, and tendrils of dark growth shot up and entwined over his boots before desiccating, freezing and dying. The air curdled, and the stench of sulphur wafted across an already pungent landscape of varied stinks.

The primarch paused. Then, slowly, he lowered himself to his knees. He extended a claw and gathered up a clod of earth. He kneaded it for a moment, then pressed it to his rebreather, as if he wanted to taste it, or inhale its aroma, or perhaps just feel it against his withered skin.

Then he rose. The movements were cumbersome, slow, as if made underwater, accompanied by the squeals and creaks of his ramshackle armour.

Morarg walked up to him warily. He didn't know why, really, only that it had been a long time, and an equerry ought to be beside his lord.

Mortarion let him come. The Deathshroud fell back.

***'I wished to taste it,'*** the primarch said, in a voice that was like the rattle of wind over grave-chimes. ***'But of course, it has changed. We have all of us changed.'***

Morarg came to a halt before his primarch, craning his neck to look up at his face. 'My hearts are gladdened to see you again, lord.'

Mortarion's face creased under the cowl, as if a dry smile disfigured the features, or a grimace. ***'I would have come sooner. My father has made this place poison for me. Perhaps the only poison that could affect me now. Still, I am used to that.'*** He looked out, looked up, his gaze falling on the bastion ahead. Now, suddenly, the place did not look quite so impressive. ***'And He weakens now. Little by little, His power erodes. We shall squeeze Him, eh? We shall squeeze the last of that cold blood from Him.'***

Morarg didn't understand. His mind seemed more sluggish than it had once been. Or perhaps it was just different – able to grasp some things more surely, apt to lose its grip on others. His confusion must have been obvious, for Mortarion didn't move off, or take up his scythe, but remained where he was, standing ankle deep in the rotting vegetation his presence had conjured.

***'You are not what you were, Caipha,'*** Mortarion said. ***'You were once a wretch on a toxic world. I made you something else. Then my father made you something else again. And now an older power intervenes, and you are altered a third time. Are you still the same person? You have the same***

***name. That may be what binds us back to the source. Our names. Our signifiers. Everything else – the blades, the flesh, the powers – they do not persist.'***

He drew closer to Morarg, towering over him, shedding new and fouler stenches with every movement. ***'I am become what I hated. I am become without end, without beginning. I am become unnatural. I cannot cross His boundary. I offend against His sense of… hygiene.'***

The next word came to Morarg's lips too easily, as if summoned by a spell. 'Daemon.'

***'It brings gifts with it,'*** Mortarion agreed. ***'I see where His mind walks, now. I see His nature, burning like a flame in the void. I even understand some of the things He did.'*** A hoarse laugh. ***'Too late, now, of course.'***

'And yet… is it?' Morarg's voice was edged with desperation. 'You could take us back, could you not? If you willed it?'

The primarch didn't seem to hear the question. Or perhaps it did not deserve an answer.

***'I spent my life looking for the ends of things,'*** he said, softly, speaking to himself. ***'I wished for an end to suffering. I wished for an end to the desires that plagued me. Then I wished for an end to this rotten empire, and thought that was my last challenge. Whenever I got what I wished for, I saw another end ahead of me, something else to accomplish. But then, on Calas' damned ship, I made the final choice, and erased the very idea. There is the paradox – I spoke the word, and from that moment, I had always done it. I had always been like this. I have memories from a time before I was born. I have memories from events that have yet to take place. I see the world of the senses like a rumpled cloak spread out before me, and I struggle to hold on to its hem.'***

And then Morarg understood. There was no going back. It was not just impossible – it made no sense now. There was no *back*.

'Then…' he started, uncertainly, feeling the sicknesses boil within him, feeling his muscles atrophy, 'what is to be done now?'

Mortarion drew himself up to his full height. He extended his claw, and the soil of Terra fell from its outstretched talons.

The air thickened. The sound of buzzing intensified, and it became markedly hotter. A rumble ran along the landscape, opening up fissures that gaped and popped.

Morarg felt a bitter taste at the back of his throat, a ringing in his ears, and found himself wanting to scrabble away. He recognised the tang of it from the *Terminus Est*, the same forces that had run rampant across those disease-crammed decks.

His gaze followed the direction of the primarch's arm, just in time to see the terrain around the distant bastion erupt. The land under it rebelled, bursting apart amid clouds of frenzied buzzing. Huge cracks leapt up the outer walls, from which black-green foliage spilled like entrails. More alarms went off, pathetic against the gathering thunder of breaking earth. An explosion rang out, releasing bursts of green-tinged lightning, then another. A watchtower collapsed in a pall of rubble-dust, and the great aquila snapped in two. It was as if a thousand years of degradation had been accelerated into a few moments, running rampant in a deranged vid-sequence.

The Death Guard assembled there watched in silence. They never said a word. One by one, seeing the devastation unfold, they started to march towards the fortress. As the outer walls tumbled, they mutely lowered their weapons towards the many breaches. Death, and the promise of death, was calling them again.

Mortarion began to advance with them, keeping his sorcerous grip locked on the bastion the whole time. As he went, the air around him split, bursting and sliding like tallow on glass. His claw tightened, and more adamantium blast-plates folded into spinning debris. The Deathshroud came along with him, revenants of decay, their scythes crackling with black-edged energies.

The aura of ruin was a sham. Morarg watched the whole time, and saw the power coiled up within that decrepit shell of rags. He realised then what had been bargained for. This was power beyond a dream. This was a power beyond time. This was despair fermented in eternity, the primal ache that would one day smother the stars themselves.

He fell in behind Mortarion, marching in silent lockstep.

'What is to be done?' he breathed, swinging his blunt blade in readiness. 'What we have always done. Endure.'

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# ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**Graham McNeill** has written many titles for The Horus Heresy, including the Siege of Terra novellas *Sons of the Selenar* and *Fury of Magnus*, the novels *The Crimson King* and *Vengeful Spirit*, and the *New York Times* bestselling *A Thousand Sons* and *The Reflection Crack'd*, the latter of which featured in *The Primarchs* anthology. Graham's Ultramarines series, featuring Captain Uriel Ventris, is now seven novels long, and has close links to his Iron Warriors stories, the novel *Storm of Iron* being a perennial favourite with Black Library fans. He has also written the Forges of Mars trilogy, featuring the Adeptus Mechanicus, and the Warhammer Horror novella *The Colonel's Monograph*. For Warhammer, he has written the Warhammer Chronicles trilogy *The Legend of Sigmar*, the second volume of which won the 2010 David Gemmell Legend Award.

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**An extract from *Lion El'Jonson: Lord of the First*.**

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Norlev hated the ship.

He hated the high-frequency whine of her three hundred-year-old plasma combustors. He had barely slept since his transfer from the laser defence platforms on Muspel. Even with the ship at its geostationary low anchorage over the capitolis complex at Sheitansvar, which it always was, even when the reactors were only working to minimum power requirements, which they *always* were, Norlev could feel the trembling through the bulkhead beside his bunk. When he did manage to sleep he had bad dreams – dreams of shivering cold, claws on the other side of the metal – and he would rise less rested than he had begun. He hated that it was always too cold, and he hated that it was always too dark. He hated that the vox-satellites were still down. He hadn't been able to relay a message to Anastana and his sons in six months.

But most of all he hated the damned ship.

Her name was the *Obrin*. Together with another two dozen out-of-date warships and semi-derelicts, she had been left behind when the Crusade fleet had moved on to brighter worlds. Much like Norlev. Had it been Norlev's decision he would have scrapped the lot and recycled the parts.

Maybe then the vox-satellites would be working.

Ignoring his crewmates in the armsmen's dormitory, Norlev walked straight for his locker.

He despised its utilitarian gunmetal finish, the squeak it made as it opened. As if mankind could bring light and reason to the galaxy, but not a tube of oil. The scuffed mirror on the door's inside winked as it crossed the light from the lho-brown lumen strip, suspended in a nest of crash webbing and naked cables.

Norlev glanced into the mirror, his eyes widening momentarily before sliding across his reflection like a spotlight over smoke.

Behind him Yansliev and Valdimir sat in fold-down alum-frame chairs. Empty *ranka* glasses and coloured gaming tokens littered the screw-in table that folded down from the wall between them. In the bunk beside them, Gitr lay in the single cot, still fully clothed in a cadet's uniform and an unbuckled flak vest, having apparently forgotten to undress, staring blankly at the rivets in the ceiling. The local recruits were all like that. The planet was full of them. Norlev hated their bovine docility.

What angered him more, he realised, was that he was sure he was starting to notice the same placid traits in himself. An hour lost here, a half there, gazing at walls, overlooking the everyday jibes of his crewmates until it was too late to respond.

Reaching into the locker for his uniform, Norlev pulled on his belt. He drew the sidearm from the holster and checked the load. Voss-pattern Mark IV autopistol, a single box magazine, carrying thirty high-dispersal rounds.

'What're you doing, Norlev?'

Valdimir looked up from his game, his face so much like that of a drunken dog Norlev was surprised he didn't pant as well as drool. 'Red shift doesn't start for another six hours.'

'Not another kit inspection, is it?' said Yansliev, leaning across the table with the bottle to spill more oxide-red ranka over Valdimir's glass, drill or no drill.

By the Emperor, they were as much a disgrace to the uniform as the local mobs.

He closed the locker and turned around.

'*Gavnat*,' Valdimir swore. 'What's happened to your *face*?'

Norlev shot him between the eyes.

The flechette-burst shredded most of the officer's face as well as Yansliev's hand. The ranka bottle exploded. Yansliev screamed. Not at Norlev though. Not at the autopistol. At the bloodied claw of his hand. Bits of glass and flechette stuck out of it, glittering like an unwrapped gift under the swaying lumen strip. The association was a jarring one, from a time when Norlev had been able to feel, when he hadn't felt so… *different*, and something within him forced the recollection down. He fired again. Another half-second squeeze delivered fifteen rounds until there was nothing left of

Yansliev’s head but meat dripping from a wet skull.

Gitr was still lying in his bunk, still staring blankly, but this time at Norlev, or through him, as though he could see something wondrous written inside the back of his skull.

Something prompted Norlev to lower his weapon.

He did.

A whisper reached into his thoughts from beyond the void.

‘Yes,’ he murmured, like a man half asleep.

A distant star pulsed, as if for him alone, and he basked in the cold light of its approval.

‘I know the way to the nearest armoury locker.’

Behind him Gitr turned back to the rivets in the ceiling, ignoring the blood on his cadet’s uniform, as Norlev slotted a fresh magazine into his autopistol and stepped into the corridor.

## II

‘Take us in,’ said Duriel. His voice was low, a habit of the forest, barely even registering to unaugmented ears as a whisper.

‘Weapons?’ said Stenius.

‘Not yet.’

The *Invincible Reason* had achieved complete translation into the Muspel System approximately twenty-one hours previously, and had been decelerating for the last ten. Attended by a silent entourage of battleships, cruisers and escorts, a splinter battlegroup of the Fourth Expedition Fleet sailing under the temporary, anonymous ident-colours of the 2003rd, she had made her long voyage from the darkness of the system Oort cloud under a cloak of secrecy. She had broadcast no transponder sequences or auto-identifier codes. She had made no attempt at hailing the planet’s Imperial authorities. Only now, the planet a cloud-swathed blue orb filling their screens, did the command crew commence pre-fire rituals on the behemoth warship’s void shield arrays and weapons systems.

The Lion, as was his custom, had shared little of the purpose behind this course, even with those whom rank and veterancy qualified as confidantes. Duriel, as was the custom of every Dark Angel, had spent the bulk of the last day-cycle catching up to his primarch’s thinking.

‘What in the Emperor’s name is going on out there?’

Duriel, captain of the 12th Order, senior forge-wright and master of the Ironwing, castellan of the *Invincible Reason*, lowered the slate he had been studying. Plugged into the cogitation-dense instrumentarium of the Gloriana-class capital ship’s primary command dais, the slate was superfluous, a prompt at best, an affectation at worst. If asked, he would say that he savoured the tactile experience of ‘reading’. Even *if* his artificer harness had already in-loaded the data in bulk and dumped it via the connection nodes imbedded in his black carapace directly into his spinal column.

He was, as his tutors in the Emperor’s forges of Narodnya and Manraga would often despair, as stuck in his ways as a five-millennia-old cogitator when he chose to be.

The Legion flagship’s central dais was a rock of adamantium struts and insulated cabling, buffeted from all sides by a sea of system noise and glittering lights. To stand there and listen, to actually *listen*, was to lose oneself to a seethe of warring linguistic forms. Mortal human crewmen whispered to one another in Gothic, both Low and High, impenetrable technical jargon and a plethora of dialects from a score of disparate worlds. Cogitators issued binharic clicks, heavily accented with the numeral-forms of their Terran, Martian and Jovian birthplaces. Red-robed machine-priests muttered in the harsh sing-song of lingua-technis. Armoured legionaries, stationed about the deck like angelic statuary, addressed one another curtly in Legion battle-cant or in any one of the dozens of Calibanite languages officially codified *lingua mortis* by the census takers of the Great Crusade.

Duriel, and in the absence of the Lion perhaps only Duriel, could follow it all.

He was not sure if his talent for language was one he had possessed before his ascension to the ranks of angels, for the opportunity to discover it had never arisen in the forest encampment in which he had lived as a child. He had not then met a man to whom he was not related, much less heard one speak another language, before the Legion recruiter had come to take him to Aldurukh.

The bridge’s cathedral-like ceiling was paned with sloping plates of armourglass, ultra-hard and toughened with void frost, baring the deck to the scattered lights of the void. Only a handful of stars were visible. The

rest had been bleached out by the albedo of the bright, blue-green crescent that was their destination.

Muspel.

Duriel felt the nape of his neck prickle, the way it once had when something he was not yet consciously aware of stalked him through the trees.

‘What do you see out there, lord?’ he murmured to himself, at a register below even his habitual whisper.

‘What do they say, brother?’ said Farith Redloss, nodding towards the slate in Duriel’s hand. As master of the Dreadwing his rank and Duriel’s were technically equal, but aboard the *Invincible Reason*, the additional title of castellan gave Duriel sovereignty. Though Redloss called him brother, he posed his question with the due respect.

‘Little that I am at liberty to share.’

Redloss grunted, but pressed no further.

Duriel smiled, his planned response interrupted by the frustrated burr of a Mechanicum priest below the main dais, struggling again with the command systems’ Himalazian base code.

The forge-wrights of the Ironwing were, insofar as Duriel knew, a unique brotherhood amongst the Legiones Astartes, serving as a parallel and independent reservoir of machine lore to that provided by the Legion’s Techmarines. Following in the footsteps of their earliest forebears, they learned their arts from the enginesires and artisan-lords of the Throneworld’s ancient forges – the very same forges that, long after they had tutored the antecedents of the First Legion in machinecraft, would go on to host Fulgrim and Vulkan and Ferrus Manus. The First Legion as a whole, too, still received the bulk of its consumables and equipment from Terra rather than from any of the forge worlds that had been swallowed up by the growing Imperium – much to the occasional chagrin of the Expedition’s vestigial Mechanicum complement. Regardless of how far the Expedition journeyed from the Throneworld, however many times it had split and split again, this preference had remained in place. To most outsiders who had served prior terms of service on other Expedition vessels, the experience of a First Legion warship was one, initially at least, of horror, spent wondering how any craft as complicated as a Gloriana could function without a horde of crimson robes beetling about its interiors. The

truth was that the forge-wrights and Techmarines were capable of tending to all but the most arcane and intemperate of their technologies themselves, and did so.

Duriel was the master of a select order, a caretaker of its secrets as much as its technologies, and even he was not privy to why any of this should be so.

He had his theories.

He scratched thoughtfully at his beard, his hand un-gauntleted but sheathed in signus rings and digital lasers. It was a mortal habit that, he knew, brought his brothers in the Council of Masters no shortage of amusement.

*It makes you look like a peasant,* Griffayn of the Firewing had once said.

'What can you tell us?' said Stenius. The courtly, Calibanite manner of speaking whilst actually saying little was one that many of the older Terrans in the Legion found irritating. Stenius, though he masked it as well as any lord of Caliban, was assuredly one of them.

Duriel frowned at the slate in his hand.

'123997.M30. Two Chartist ships lost in the warp en route to Muspel. 125997.M30. A Mechanicum ark transiting the subsector is forced into an emergency translation. It isn't heard from again, presumed lost with all hands. 129997.M30. The first brigade of Muspellian irregulars is lost in its entirety, *five thousand men-at-arms*, in transit to a training exercise aboard the Muspel XII astropathic relay station. No reasons given and no trace of the missing conveyor and its escorts is ever found. 131997.M30. A fire aboard one of the orbital substations effectively cuts off nine-tenths of the planet from vox and auspex coverage. That was six months ago. It still hasn't been repaired. A rash of accidents among the resident Mechanicum, apparently. And the transport that was supposed to be bringing in a fresh detachment along with a strengthened skitarii detail is months overdue.'

'You make it sound like the Bermudan Tryptych,' said Stenius.

'The what?' said Redloss.

'An old Terran myth,' Duriel explained. Stenius looked at him, surprised. 'The libraries of Manraga were well conserved, brother, and its masters encourage broader study.'

'There are no oceans left on Terra,' said Stenius, 'and yet we still tell ourselves tales of captains driven mad and ships lost without trace.'

‘Humans will always need their ghost stories,’ said Duriel. ‘It was the Ninth that brought this world to compliance, was it not?’

‘The original inhabitants of Muspel had regressed into a state of savagery,’ said Redloss. ‘Barbarians, squatting in the ruins of Dark Age cities, crying out for the primitive gods that had abandoned them. According to Sanguinius’ own writings the native populace was entirely passive, not a trace of choler in its humours at all.’

‘The Ninth didn’t find even a single weapon,’ said Stenius. ‘Not so much as a flint axe.’

Redloss crossed his arms over the broad curve of his breastplate. ‘I’ve never seen anything like it anywhere.’

‘By every iterator’s account, the Blood Angels left the world perfectly compliant,’ said Stenius.

A tectonic rumble passed through the command deck superstructure, and a burst of thrust from the *Invincible Reason*’s colossal drives slowed her for the final half-million-kilometre coast into the planet’s orbital fleet anchorages. Across the low wall of display panes that encircled the dais Duriel could see the icons of eighteen night-black battleships as they joined the flagship in her deceleration. Their actual appearance, as glimpsed through the flagship’s crystalflex screens, was far less ordered or majestic. A positional thruster out of alignment. The faintest wobble in bearing. The oily shimmer of rolling shield blackouts. Others were missing sensor masts, or looked as though they had faced down an asteroid and lost. The scars of Rangda were fresh on all of them. And not just the ships. Only the Lion himself knew the true toll that the third and final xenocide had taken on the Legion. It was a burden he chose to bear alone. Duriel sighed.

They would always be the First, envied and admired by all, but the X, the XIII, the XVI, even the XVII in spite of their own setbacks, all threatened to surpass them in strength and in deed now.

But they had done their duty.

The Dark Angels always did their duty.

‘I wish I knew what we were doing here,’ Stenius muttered, interrupting his commander’s reverie. ‘The warp claims its share of shipping, and some regions have always been more treacherous than others. A few hundred die-hard malcontents intent on disruption is only to be expected on a newly compliant world, even one as ostensibly peaceable as Muspel, whatever the

Ninth claims.’

Duriel gestured towards the peaceful pirouette of void-anchored ships in the crystalflex, a pair of semi-retired heavy cruisers wearing a collage of obsolete heraldries; a handful of destroyers and corvettes, all drifting in near-total EM-silence. A couple of the lighter escorts were signalling contradictory distress codes, one engine fire and one full-blown mutiny, but the rest were eerily quiet.

‘Does this not seem amiss to you, brother?’

‘This is beneath us,’ said Stenius. ‘Unless it’s the Lion’s intention to bring slight upon the Angel.’

‘*That is beneath you, my son.*’

The three knights turned. Stenius blanched and dropped to one knee, head bowed, chin to his plastron. The command deck’s titanic blast doors ground into the receiving blocks as Lion El’Jonson, primarch of the First Legion, swept up the ascent ramp to the dais.

Huge in his intricately crafted harness of powered plate, a gift from the Emperor Himself, the Lion was an enigma to the laws of reality, somehow achieving the feat of being larger, *greater*, than the mighty Gloriana that conveyed him. Gilt scrollwork decorated the curved black ceramite, ornate reliefs depicting forest scenes. At one hip, the artificer edge of the *Lion Sword* rested in a sheath artfully fashioned to evoke folded leaves. In a holster worn from the other was the *Fusil Actinaeus*. The Emperor alone knew how many lives of human, xenos and sentient AI it had terminated since its conception in the Dark Age of Technology, before He had consigned it to the bottomless vaults of the First Legion’s armouries. But it had found a fitting home in the left hand of the secular enlightenment’s foremost god of war.

The Lion moved as a predator moves through the forest, all about him hush and stillness as he swept his fur-edged cloak from behind him and took his seat in the carved wooden command throne. His majesty went beyond mere physical stature, his brooding presence alone enough to cow a hall of proud transhuman knights. The Lion was warrior above all other warriors. Seventeen brothers he may have had, but that was far from an acknowledgement that any had been made even remotely equal or that the Lion of Caliban was not the most singular of beings.

Drawing a crown of dark ceramite from his head, allowing his long mane

of russet-gold hair to fall across over his shoulders, he leaned forward, eyes the same brutal green of Caliban's forests taking in two dozen display panes all at once. The Dark Angels were capable of swift and incisive action, but in every endeavour, in peace or in war, it was the unseen hand of the Lion that guided them, providing for each of his sons a piece of the larger picture that he and he alone could see.

The universe waited on his word.

He made it wait.

'Board those ships,' he said, a voice so authoritative it could never have been mistaken for human.

'Which ones, sire?' said Duriel.

'All of them.'

## III

Aravain reached up into the cargo netting in the overhead space, carefully hanging the bundle of dried leaves and seed cones. When he pulled his hands away, the scent on his gauntlet was that of another world, a dark and hateful world, a world that had never wished anything for Aravain and his kind but the bloodiest of deaths. He closed his eyes and drew breath, and for the briefest of moments the reek of promethium and the howl of turbofans pitched for vertical uplift was no more. In its place, the lethal, still-wild dignity of the mountainous Northwilds, his home, still reigned. He opened his eyes, allowing the launch bay klaxons and engine noise to again pass his mental guard. The simple charm he had set bounced and turned on its wire as the rest of the squad trouped up the boarding ramp. He made a quick sign in the air, the emerald leaves of his psychic hood breathing the ice-cold winds of Mount Sartana over the nape of his neck, as he mouthed a prayer against the dangers of the void.

'Brother-knights,' barked the squad sergeant as he came last up the ramp.

His name, *Kaye*, had been etched in curving filigree into the edgework of his armour, the plasteel oiled and lapped to a dark mirror-shine. An elaborate hierarchy of symbols identified him as a knight of the Third Order, 15th Company, commander of Tactical Squad 'Martlet'. The emblem of the Stormwing was etched into his breastplate. And it appeared again, more discreetly, alongside the unit markings on his right pauldron, together

with a deliberately obtuse arrangement of subordinate sigils that denoted rank in the parallel echelons of the hexagrammaton. Each new examination of his armour revealed heraldic icons of secret orders more obscure even than these, enfolded within leaf and laurel motifs.

He drew a long, cross-hilted Calibanite warblade from its sheath.

‘On the eve of battle, we give reverence.’

The squad sergeant turned his sword point down to the gunship’s deck plates and then went to one knee, his battleplate purring as he lowered his brow to the crosspiece. The Dark Angels crowding the troop aisle similarly took the knee, swearing on blades and bolters.

The mortal woman already strapped into her too-large restraints reached instinctively for the confiscated imager unit that should have been in her satchel. From the corner of his eye Aravain saw her frown in annoyance.

‘For the Lion and Caliban,’ Kaye declared.

‘For the Lion and Caliban,’ came the rejoinder.

The sergeant rose with a whirr of servo-assisted knee joints as the rest of the squad backed into their restraint harnesses.

Aravain found himself directly opposite the woman. *Savine*, Kaye had called her. She flashed him a nervous smile, which he ignored. Kaye banged his fist on the roof, reaching over the high rim of his gorget to manually vox-click a ready signal to the cockpit. The shriek of the turbofans redoubled in intensity. The human woman muttered her own prayer as the hatch swung up to mute the launch bay din and locked. Aravain’s long moustaches obscured a thin smile. Her carefully secular phrasing, even in the midst of prayer, amused the cynic in him. That she was diligent enough to use it even whilst in the grip of fear of what was to follow spoke of an inner courage that impressed him. Despite the conspicuous medicae armband and flak vest that she wore for protection, the woman was clearly one of the remembrancers that had joined the Expedition fleet in the decades after Perditus. The Dark Angels were not the XVI or the III, whose embrace of the new order seemed to speak of poor taste, a boorish desire to have one’s achievements celebrated beyond the ranks of brotherhood, but that hadn’t stopped a persistent and self-assured handful from trying.

The allure of the First, he supposed.

He closed his eyes, blotting out external noise, preparing himself to spend the minutes of void flight in meditation.

‘Is it normal for a Legion combat squad to be accompanied by one of its Librarians?’

He gritted his teeth, eyes still closed. ‘No.’

‘What’s the significance of that… fetish you put in the ceiling?’

Aravain said nothing, and the woman fell mercifully quiet. With a lurch the Thunderhawk lifted from its landing block, pirouetting on its slab-hulled axis towards the launch bay doors. The woman murmured. The gunship shuddered into forward motion. The sudden shift in velocity barely affected the enhanced humours of a Legiones Astartes legionary, but the remembrancer gripped the harness straps as though she feared she might be thrown into space.

‘Why… would the Lion… accept an… imagist… onto… his… ship… and then… deny her… her… imager?’

‘Who can say?’

Unlike the human woman’s, Aravain’s vocal cords were scarcely perturbed by the gunship’s vibrations.

‘What… do you… think… we’re going to… find… over there?’

Trigaine, Kaye’s direct subordinate, chuckled as the rest of his brothers fitted helmets and performed last-minute checks on their weapons.

‘I don’t know about you, my brothers, but I’m still hoping for orks.’

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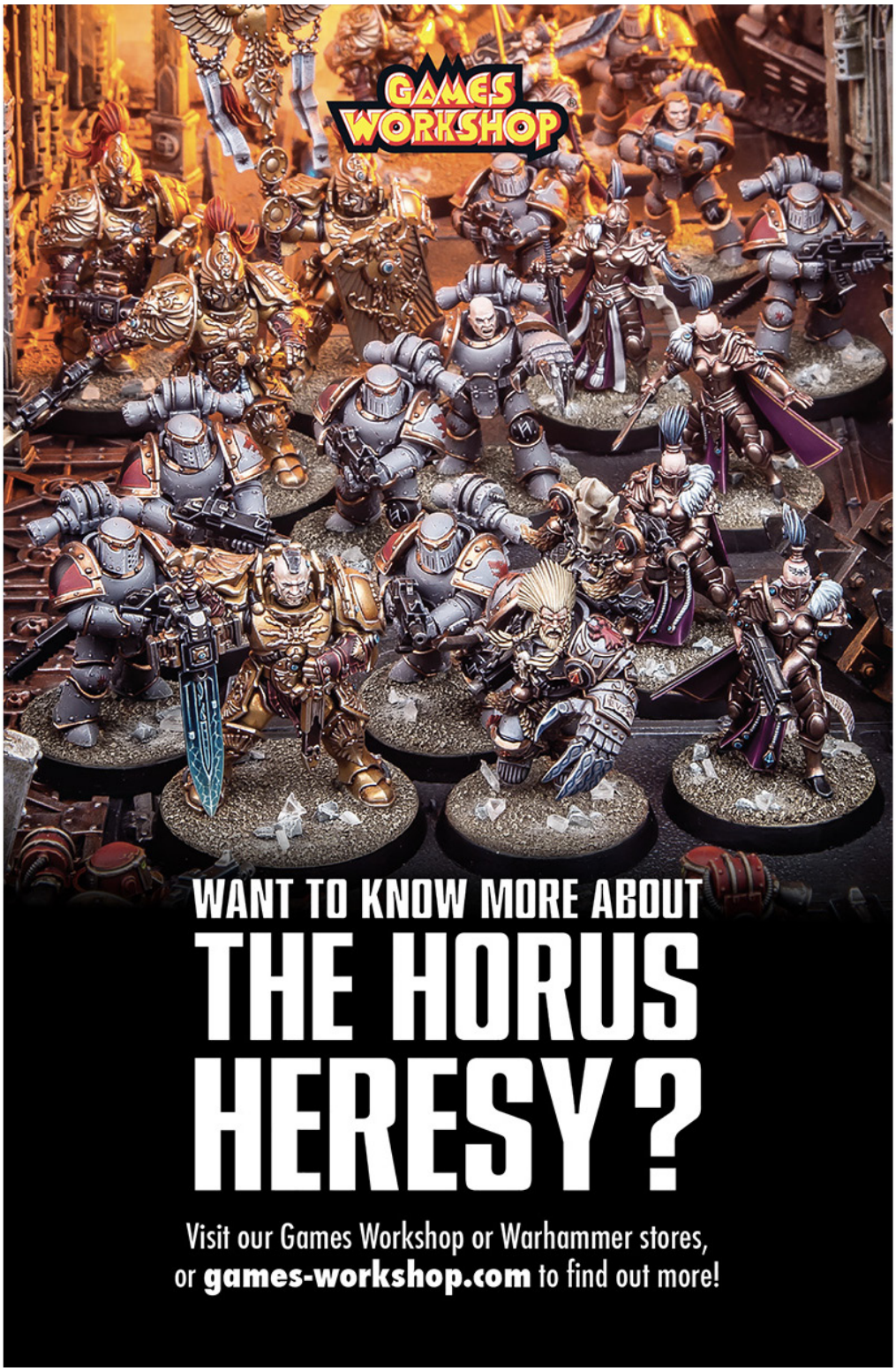
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